

THE VICKI BARR AIR STEWARDESS SERIES

THE SEARCH FOR THE MISSING TWIN



BURTON WELLS

Co-Author of THE CHERRY AMES Nurse Stories



*THE SEARCH FOR THE
MISSING TWIN*

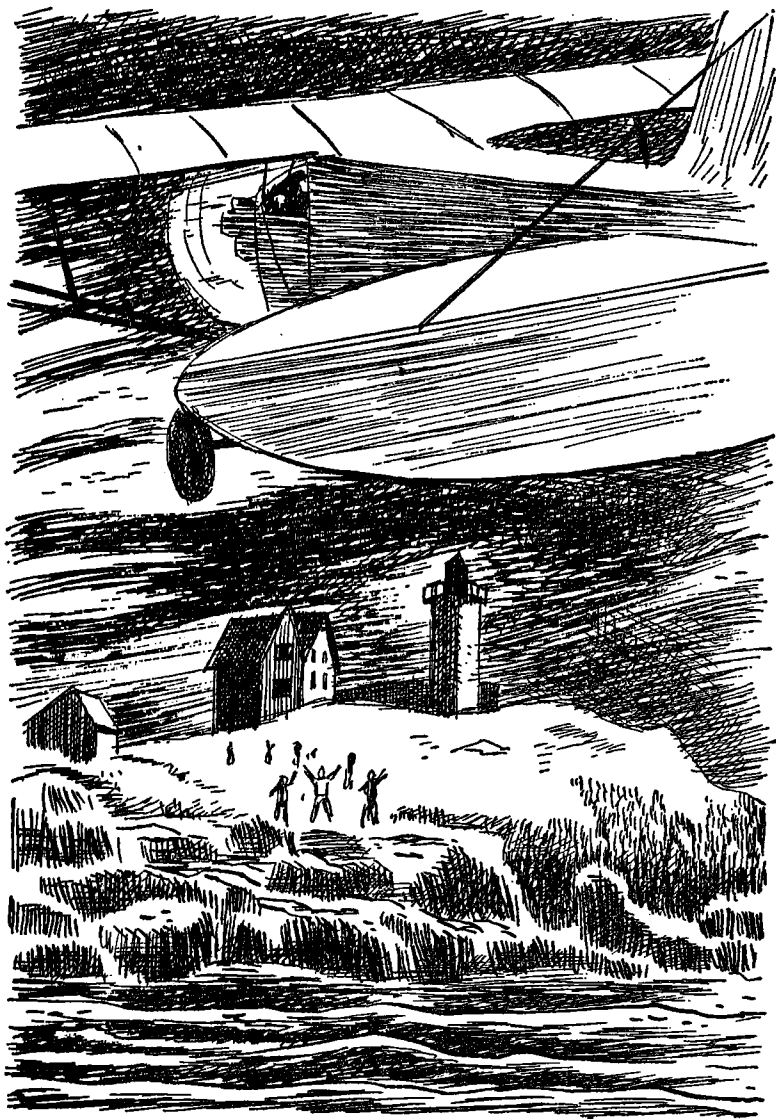
The CHERRY AMES Stories

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The VICKI BARR Flight Stewardess Series

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What were they trying to tell her?

THE VICKI BARR FLIGHT STEWARDESS SERIES



*THE SEARCH
FOR THE
MISSING TWIN*

BY HELEN WELLS



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CHAPTER I

Enchanted Island

"DID YOU HEAR THAT? VICKI, COME HERE AND LISTEN to this special news bulletin."

Vicki joined her father beside the living-room radio. It was a snowy Sunday afternoon in December, a good day to stay indoors. Mrs. Barr, seated on the couch, put down a magazine to listen to the announcement, and Ginny, Vicki's young sister, stopped playing chopsticks on the piano.

"—storm warning. The hurricane is roaring northward from the tropical waters of the Bahamas. Instead of hitting Florida as expected, it is charging up the Atlantic Coast. Norfolk reports winds approaching sixty miles an hour, and an oil tanker has collided with a freighter in the storm. New York Harbor is sending rescue crews of divers. New England is battening down—"

"You'd better not attempt to fly this afternoon, Victoria." Her father turned the radio down very low.

"But I'm due in Boston tonight." She was home only on week-end leave from her job as a flight stewardess for Federal Airlines. "Don't worry, Dad. There's no hurricane blowing here in Illinois, thank goodness."

"You'll be flying into it, though," her curly-headed mother said. "Boston— Didn't the announcer say New England expects to feel the storm next? Within an hour or two? Lewis, please—"

Professor Barr turned the radio on full again. They listened in silence, her father looking very thoughtful.

"New England, already stricken with a blizzard, reports three fishing boats in trouble. Coastal towns, particularly those in Maine, are preparing to receive the full fury of the gale. Winds of ninety miles an hour are expected by nightfall. Whole islands are being evacuated in Maine, but only those islands which own a ship heavy enough to withstand December seas—"

"Our friends, the Verga family!" Vicki exclaimed.

"—zero temperatures. The Coast Guard is limited by—"

At the end of the report, Betty Barr rose and snapped off the radio. She did not usually look so serious. "I'd hate to be on Fortune Island tonight," she said. "Exposed to the Atlantic."

An expression of concern on her face, Ginny said, "Doesn't sound as if rescue planes are able to get through, does it?"

Vicki shook her head. Although she was the only licensed private pilot of the Barr family, she did not need to tell them that ninety-mile-an-hour winds would tear an ordinary aircraft apart.

"Fortune Island has nothing but fishing craft," Vicki said slowly, "and the lobstermen's boats. They can't reach the mainland with those."

The Barrs knew Fortune Island well. They had vacationed there last summer and Vicki had met Mary Bostwick, or Mary Verga. The stepdaughter of Benjamin Verga, one of the lobstermen in the village of three hundred persons, she seemed to the Barrs somehow not to belong there, not quite to fit in. Her father had died when she was small, and her mother, Dorothea Bostwick, had later married Benjamin Verga. Yet Vicki always felt there might be more to Mary's history than that. Where all the other people of Fortune Island were sternly practical—and had to be, on the isolated, rocky northern island—Mary would sit for hours listening to the wind blowing and the sea roaring, which swelled to music in her imagination. Like her mother, she lived very much alone in her own mind. She had developed a trusting friendship for Vicki, though, and had led her to a secret cave which she had shown no one else. Vicki could see her vividly in her mind's eye, a tall, long-limbed girl of seventeen with pansy-brown eyes and hair as dark as Vicki's was fair.

"I hate to think of Mary and her parents caught in this storm," she murmured.

"The worst of it is," Mrs. Barr said, "there's nothing we can do to help them. Not at this distance."

"Well, worrying won't help the Vergas and their neighbors." But Lewis Barr was disturbed, too. "Maybe after tonight, after the storm abates, relief crews can reach their community."

"But they have to live through tonight." Mrs. Barr wandered across the long, pleasant living room. "We all know what these winds and a rough sea can do to an island only three miles long and a mile wide. Blow the houses down, wash people into the ocean—"

"Now, Betty," Mr. Barr said firmly. "Probably the worst that will happen is that Fortune Island may be cut off without supplies of food and fuel."

"That would be bad enough in this weather. Oh, Vicki, I wish you wouldn't fly this afternoon!"

"I'm not going any farther north than Boston. Boston isn't a danger area. Honestly, Mother, Dad, it's perfectly all right. If it isn't, our plane will be grounded and we'll wait out the storm."

Ginny yawned. "You'd better pack if you don't want to be late." She stood up, a plump, matter-of-fact fourteen-year-old. "Want a helper?"

"Thanks, yes."

The sisters, both blond as moonlight, went upstairs together. Vicki looked fragile but definitely was not; there were courage and intelligence behind her forget-me-not-blue eyes. At the stair landing Ginny muttered:

"Honestly, is it safe for you to fly today?"

"You, too! Don't you think the Civil Aeronautics rules are designed for safety? Well, then, that's a fine question from a Wing Scout."

Ginny bowed three times and said she apologized to the CAA.

In the bedroom which Vicki and Ginny shared, they did not talk much. Both were busy remembering sunny summer days on Fortune Island, swimming with Mary in water so cold it tingled, and sailing in her stepfather's fishing boat among the tiny, wild islands which jeweled Maine's rocky coast.

Ginny helped Vicki change into her trim stewardess uniform. She arranged her glamorous older sister's toilet articles in the overnight bag, and locked it.

"When will you be home again, Vic?"

"I'm not sure, baby." That was always a question. Vicki loved being at The Castle with her family, and she loved her job in the sky. She could not have both at once. "It will depend on where the airline schedules send me next."

"I'll ride to Avery Airport with you. Want me to telephone Bill now?"

Vicki nodded. She fastened the perky flight cap on her ash-blond hair, picked up her gloves, purse, and the trim winter coat which matched her blue uniform. She hoped her friends on Fortune Island, particularly Mary Verga, had warm coats like the

one on her arm, against tonight's terrible weather.

"Take care," her mother said as she kissed Vicki good-by. "Send us a telegram from Boston when you land."

"I will—collect, because you're a silly to fret. Good-by, Dad. I hope your students at the university worry you less than I do."

"I've learned you can take care of yourself." He smiled. "Sure you don't want me to drive you to Bill's airport?"

"Really not. The bus will be fine."

With her little sister, bundled up in stout clothing, Vicki walked to the bus stop at the edge of Fairview. Vicki turned for one more glimpse of their house. Its tower, like that of a miniature castle, rose on the hill, dominating snow-covered gardens and lake. From here to Bill Avery's small airport in open country was only a few miles.

"Did Bill say anything special on the phone?" Vicki asked, as they boarded the bus.

"Said it's pretty windy to make speed in the Piper Cub. He's going to take his big old crate." Ginny meant the DC-3 which Bill had purchased from the Air Force, after his tour of service, and tuned up.

Young Bill Avery had taught Vicki to fly and often wished he hadn't. He said so when Vicki and Ginny, after the bus ride, found him in the hangar checking over the DC-3. He climbed down from the engine to the big wing, then swung down to the floor.

"Doggone, Vicki, don't you ever stay in Fairview so I can see you?" His dark-blue eyes snapped at her. "My prize pupill"

"My stewardess job would take me all over, even if you'd never taught me to fly. Anyway, your heart belongs to your airport."

Bill grinned, a long dimple creasing his cheek. "Touché. But wait until we form our flyin' club this summer. Then you'll beg to be around."

"Can I join, too?" Ginny demanded. "When I get to be sixteen, I mean. Can we call it the Pegasus Flying Club?"

"You can call it the Band of Angels, for all I care. Excuse me a minute."

Bill went off to give instructions to his A&E mechanic, Jack, who would be in charge of the field while Bill was aloft. He was also, Vicki knew, obtaining from the Weather Bureau by telephone the latest report on flight conditions.

"Vic, do you think Bill means what he says about a flying club?"

"Of course he does. It would bring customers to his field. You study hard at your Wing Scouts ground-school course, baby."

"What do you think Cookie and I and all the older Girl Scouts have been doing in our spare time?"

Vicki, knowing Bill to be happy-go-lucky to the point of carelessness, made a quick check of the D.C.-3 herself. She had just finished and was standing there looking innocent and helpless when Bill

strode back into the hangar. He was wearing his leather jacket and carried a flight chart.

"I don't like the Weather Bureau's report much," he said. "We'll make it up to Chicago easy as pie, but how's your Federal plane goin' to land in Boston? New England's really catchin' the storm. Maine's the worst. Say, haven't you some friends way up in Maine?"

"Yes, we have."

At that moment Jack ran in. He and Bill towed the plane, using a small motor truck, out of the hangar onto the flight strip.

The girls followed them outdoors. Bill clambered aboard, turned on the ignition, and Jack spun the first, then the second propeller. The plane as Bill warmed it up set up a terrific roar and wind. Vicki had to shout.

"Well, good-by, Ginny honey. See you next time."

"Happy landings, Vic. Maybe when you reach Boston . . . more news about Maine!"

Jack boosted Vicki into the plane and slammed the door. He and Ginny backed a safe distance away. The plane roared and trembled as Bill built up power, then smoothly taxied down the runway. At the far end of the field, Bill turned the big ship around into the wind, and, after gathering speed in the final run, it rose into the air. They gained altitude fast, and went streaking away to the north.

In the cabin Bill and Vicki did not talk much. He

turned on the plane's short-wave radio for weather reports. Conditions were growing worse. "Hey, pigeon! You worried about your friends?" Vicki nodded. Bill whistled a popular tune to cheer her up but that did not help much.

The one-hundred-and-sixty-mile flight from Fairview to Chicago took slightly over an hour. In that time, it seemed to Vicki she relived an entire summer.

In her mind's eye she could see the dark-green pine trees, the rugged gray rocks and cliffs of Maine, its blue waters dotted with boats. Whether she recalled mornings on the beach, or the delicious lobster-bake party Mrs. Verga had given them, or Aunt Lydia's Inn where the Barrs had stayed, or the gulls wheeling and crying overhead—Mary Verga stood at the center, the heart, of every Maine memory. Mary running, her black hair flying, after her gray Angora cat—Mary sailing a fishing boat with easy skill, and inventing a ridiculous Landlubber's Dictionary for the Barr girls—Mary recounting the grim Indian history and legends of the lonely islands—yet never herself seeming native there.

"Vicki? Pigeon! What're you daydreamin' about so hard? I need a navigator about here."

Bill handed her the flight chart. They were close to Chicago by now. Vicki watched below for the roads, rivers, and bridges which the flight chart indicated as guides, but her mind was still on Mary, far away on Fortune Island. She scarcely noticed Bill

radioing the Chicago control tower for instructions to land.

When they were down, they had their usual friendly argument as Vicki insisted on paying for the flight, like any of Bill's other passengers. Bill made a big joke of it this winter Sunday afternoon. He grinned and even made faces; still Vicki only half smiled. He abruptly stopped his pretense.

"I don't blame you for bein' worried about your friends. What do you think you can do about it?"

"When I get to Boston, I'll see. I don't know yet."

"Got your pilot's license with you, pigeon?"

"I always have it with me."

"Well, I wouldn't advise you to fly if— Aw, I know you never listen to me. Use sense, that's all."

"I'm not foolhardy like *some* pilots I know," she retorted, smiling.

Bill kissed her good-by with unusual seriousness, and watched her report to the Federal Airlines hangar and her flight crew, to start work.

By late Sunday evening Vicki had checked through her empty plane cabin and turned in her flight report. The trip had gone off uneventfully and they had been only slightly delayed by head winds. Vicki felt more preoccupied than tired. The crew car let her out on Tremont Street, where she said good night to her captain and copilot and went into the hotel where the stewardesses stayed.

None of her friends happened to be there that evening. Vicki asked to have a sandwich sent to her room, then bought all the Boston and Maine newspapers she could find on the hotel newsstand.

In her hotel room Vicki turned on the radio. Every station, every few minutes, broadcast reports on the storm.

“At Portland, the Red Cross is mobilizing relief trucks to aid small coastal towns. There is some doubt whether the trucks can get through the gale and snowy roads. Alarm is expressed for people living on the islands. Boats have not been able to go out since Thursday, and the islanders’ food supplies must be running low . . .”

Vicki switched to another station. “Northerly points have been declared a disaster area. With planes grounded and telephone wires down, it is not possible to know the extent of the damage, but ham-radio reports indicate—”

By this time Vicki knew what she was going to do, even before she had read the headline stories in the newspapers.

She was at the office of the Boston Welfare Society before nine o’clock on Monday morning. The big building was already busy. Relief workers had been working at top speed all night and an elevator man informed Vicki. The newspapers had described Boston Welfare as serving all of the New England area and co-operating with such diverse agencies as the

Red Cross and local Ladies' Guild church groups. Vicki felt that surely here the services of a pilot might be accepted.

She was right. What made her offer feasible, said the kindly older man who interviewed her, was that the winds had abated, though the seas had not. Boats still could not venture out, but today, for the first time, planes could get through.

"*Probably* can get through," Mr. Saunders warned Vicki. "Have you done emergency flying before? It's risky."

"I have, sir, and I know at least a portion of the Maine islands. The Fortune group."

"Good. That's where we'll send you." He marked a wall map.

Vicki felt gratified that, for once, no one said, "But a girl pilot!" or "But you're so small and rather delicate looking." Flying required good judgment and skill, not strength, and as for strength, Vicki was wiry and quick.

Mr. Saunders told her that a small, radio-equipped plane would be loaded with warm clothing, food, medicines, and possibly some fuel, and would be ready for her within the hour. She was to clear with the Meteorology Room at the airport about weather, flight charts, and possible sites around Fortune Island for landing. If she could not land her plane, she was instructed to drop the packages of food and warm clothing. If she *could* land, so much the better. Firsthand reports were needed.

The welfare officials gave her no detailed instructions; they had no time. Boston Welfare certainly was putting her on her own!

Vicki was glad, and glad of a chance actually to fly up to Fortune Island. Or as near to it as she could manage. At home in Illinois yesterday such a possibility had seemed remote. Today in Boston, here she was, borrowing overshoes and fur-lined gloves at the airport, and consulting with the Civil Air Patrol leader. She saw several other volunteers, both men and women, and several planes of various types. The CAP leader assigned Vicki to a Tri-Pacer, since it was not too large for her to handle. All the volunteers were impatient to take off.

"Try to land, if you can land, around noon when it's warmest," the CAP leader advised them in a private waiting room. "You'll be wise to start back for Boston well before dusk. The wind is no longer blowing, but no one can guarantee what the elements will do next. Good luck."



CHAPTER II

An Odd Discovery

ON THE FIRST LEG OF THE FLIGHT, VICKI KEPT WATCH for any telltale shine of ice gathering on the wings. The rubber de-icing “shoes” seemed to be pushing off the sleet all right. Even with the inferers cleaning two arcs on the plane windshield, it was difficult to see her way. For Vicki, flying solo, had to be her own navigator.

The flight chart lay open on the seat beside her, with the neatly packed parachute. Before taking off at ten fifteen she had studied the chart thoroughly, secured advice, decided on landmarks to look for, and between these check points, marked her line of flight in dark pencil. She had left a copy of her flight plan at the Boston airport, and learned which radio beams to tune in to guide her on the flight. She also had the compass on the dashboard, and in her head the rudiments of dead reckoning. Just the same, Vicki wished she could see the earth and landmarks

below a little better. Cross-country solos, piloting itself, were still fairly new to her.

"I won't be scared," Vicki told herself. "What if I do feel awfully alone? Calm—easy—that'll do it."

She flew low, watching for landmarks. The plane rolled and pitched. If she climbed higher, above the overcast, the plane would be more stable. But she had to keep low enough to see the trackless woods and winding rivers. Was Fortune Island as forlorn as this? Was Mary safe? But she did not dare let her attention wander from the controls, not even for a moment, especially since she was handling an unfamiliar ship.

A strange clanking bothered her. Not mechanical trouble, not when she was alone!

Vicki glanced fearfully at the wings, prop, then back into the cabin. The bale of clothing stood secure near the plane door but some cans of milk had been shaken loose out of the carton and were rattling around on the floor.

"Thank heaven that's all it is! Wouldn't Bill laugh at me!"

Mountains rose up to the north. Vicki nosed the plane up, and in the second hour, had to fight winds over the peaks and valleys. In these powerful currents the plane tended to veer off course. Darn it, she was losing time, wasting gas! She had plenty of fuel to carry her to Fortune Island and back to Boston, but not any to waste. Suddenly she saw the

ice-blue sparkle of the ocean. Why, in a few minutes she would be at the island.

The coastal country of Maine beneath her lay seemingly deserted and motionless, frozen white except for the dark pine forests. But as she headed her plane out over the water, Vicki saw that the chain of islands possessed their curious, lonely magic in winter, too.

It was about noon when Vicki passed the lighthouse and approached Fortune Island. Gulls rose from the rocks, screaming. She flew the length of the three-mile island to attract attention. In the heart of the village, people came running out of the low-roofed houses, and in Chub Lane the church bell began to ring. Vicki tipped the plane wings to signal them. Banking and turning, she flew large circles over Chub Lane. The villagers understood. Some of the small figures below pointed in the direction of the harbor.

What were they trying to tell her? Vicki obediently flew toward the snug little harbor where she saw fishing boats rolling at the wharves. Their masts and sails appeared not too badly injured by yesterday's storm. But why send her to the harbor? And how was she going to drop her packages and handle the controls at the same time? It *could* be done; the plane was steady enough to fly on course by itself for two or three minutes; she *could* reach for the controls in a hurry. That bale of clothing would take both hands to push out. Besides, Vicki did not much

like the risk of opening the plane door in flight if that could be avoided. A sudden sucking draft of air—

“Wish I could land,” she thought, gliding down over Chub Lane as low as she dared. The figures below pointed persistently and waved their arms. “They’re telling me to land in Greeley’s pasture! Now where’s Greeley’s barn?”

Part way toward the harbor she sighted the barn, its roof loaded with snow. A sea-borne veil of mist blew in and suddenly blurred her view. What rotten luck! Vicki heard the blast of the fog signal at the lighthouse; a gusty wind made the plane buck. She circled cautiously, keeping a sharp lookout for a rift in the mist.

There! She could see a portion of Greeley’s pasture again. Remembering it to be high ground, Vicki figured she might find a dry level spot on which to land. She peered down. No such luck. She’d have to land on soft snow. She’d have to make a power-stall landing.

“Well, here goes!” Vicki prayed that the village people, whom she glimpsed running after the plane, would keep a safe distance away.

Throttling the engine, she nosed the ship into a downward glide. Descending too fast? No, still safe. From second to second Vicki fed the plane varying amounts of power. Nearly down, her engine was idling now. Then she felt the wheels touch, skid, and crunch to a rolling stop in the snow. Vicki switched

off the ignition and leaned back in the seat, weak with relief. She'd made it!

Instantly the villagers surrounded the plane. She recognized several faces—mostly young people, who had outrun their elders to the pasture.

"Look, it's Vicki Barr! Remember? She was up here last summer!"

"There's food and warm clothing in the cabin," Vicki called as she opened the Tri-Pacer's door. Closer to them now, she saw that the young faces within the hoods and scarfs were pinched.

"Vicki!" It was Mary Verga, waving and pressing her way through the crowd. Not the rosy-cheeked Mary of last summer, but laughing, nevertheless. "Why, Vicki! Out of the sky like an angel!"

"Boston Welfare is the angel. How are you, Mary?" Vicki grasped her ice-cold hand. "Wait—Boys, the food and milk are for the children, so take it wherever—"

"To the schoolhouse," said Greeley's eldest son, who was a natural leader. "Is this clothes? Ours are soaked. Jed, will you lift out this bale?"

"Vicki, I'm glad," said Mary, clinging to her. "We're all glad. It's been pretty rough."

"You look hungry," Vicki said as she looked at Mary's white face.

The older townspeople were climbing over the pasture fence. They were a tired-looking group, moving clumsily in blankets and snowshoes.

"Well, many of the islanders ran out of bread, milk, and eggs. We've been living on the food we preserved last fall." Mary laughed. "Since we usually save our canned supplies for the really bad months of January and February, we ate rather sparingly."

Vicki shivered in the wind and the wet mist. She realized she was hungry herself. Mary Verga's offer of hot tea at her parents' cottage sounded awfully good. First Vicki took care of the plane: she locked the controls, instructed the boys how to place stones as chocks for the wheels, and staked down the plane with rope to a fence which remained standing.

"Hey! You flier, you! Say, it's the Barr girl!"

The older people came crowding around her. Benjamin Verga, Mary's stepfather, looked unshaken by the island's ordeal. As sturdy and weather-beaten as his own fishing boat, or as a small gnarled apple tree, Vicki thought. He shook her hand heartily.

"Now, that's a good girl! A brave girl. The children say you brought us food?"

"Yes, Mr. Verga, and warm clothes and medicines. From Boston. How are you all? Is anyone sick? Or—or missing?"

"Praise the Lord, the fishing boats made it back to harbor. We're all here, Vicki. Kind of worse for wear, and some sick, but we're here."

"Takes more'n a little blizzard to lay *us* low," said an old man whose face looked as if it had been hewn out of enduring island rock.

A worn-looking woman smiled at Vicki. At first Vicki did not recognize her. Then, with a shock, she realized that it was Aunt Lydia Adams who kept the inn. Others, too, were haggard. None of them, apparently, had gone to bed last night. Mary told her that the villagers had stayed up all night, watching to see what the storm would do next.

"Not that we had any place to run to," said Mary's mother. She was a sweet-faced, subdued woman who had always seemed to Vicki a little apart, except from her husband. "We're glad to have a friend come to help us. Now, Vicki, go home with Mary for a little rest yourself."

"We'll meet you at the schoolhouse, Mother," Mary said, and led Vicki across the snowy pasture.

Vicki was shocked to see the damaged houses along Fortune Island's one main street. In front of the post office, which was also the general store, a jeep lay turned over, smashed. If Fortune Island had possessed such a thing as telephones and electricity, wires would have been blown down.

The Vergas' modest cottage was unscathed, but chilly as a vault.

"We need fuel, everyone here needs it," Mary said, brewing tea. "We saved our coal and kerosene for hot water for first aid, and for cooking. That's

how I can present you with this *delicious* cup of tea."

"Thanks. Merry as a cricket, aren't you? Anyone would think you enjoy a gale."

"Oh, it's an adventure! Wait, Vicki, I think I have a cracker or two hidden away some place. I was saving it for my cat, Cloud. Here we are. One for each of us."

While they drank the steaming tea, Mary told how her stepfather had been out on the water with his traps, in spite of the approaching storm. "My mother was dreadfully worried. You know how excited and upset a storm makes her." Vicki had noticed this last summer.

Benjamin Verga had managed to reach the harbor and safety; so had the other fishermen. But Mr. Verga's boat had been damaged. "My father is trying to repair it," Mary said, "but all Mother can talk about is the storm. You know the story, don't you, the old story?"

"No, I don't, Mary."

"Oh." Mary grew curiously reticent. "Well, we'd better hurry over to the schoolhouse. Maybe there'll be some mittens for me. I lost mine in the confusion."

What story did the girl mean? Vicki tried to remember Fortune Island's history, as she and Mary pushed through the snow, but most of the stories she had heard had been of a century or more ago.

The islanders were proud people, independent people. In the schoolhouse, with its wooden benches and blackboard and pictures of famous sailing ships, no one wanted to accept anything beyond the essential food.

"Come now, folks," Benjamin Verga said from the side of the room. The group was as orderly as if attending a town meeting. "Can't blame us if all of a sudden we need shoes and something to warm our backs. Let the women divide up the clothes."

The women of the community already were sorting the contents of the tightly packed bale, heaping the school desks with garments. Dorothea Verga, Mary's mother, beckoned the two girls to come and help, as a few people slowly approached the piles of clothing. Mrs. Verga was sorting the garments for babies and very young children.

"This would fit Mrs. Lang's youngest," she said, holding up a snow suit. "Mary, go and tell her."

"Yes, Mother." Mary went off to another corner of the room, where several men and women were overseeing the sharing of the food. The tinned milk, meat, and other staples she had flown in were not going to go very far.

"Vicki, can you tell what size these little shoes are? And mark them."

"I'll try, Mrs. Verga."

"Oh! Whatever in the world is this? Oh, no, no!"

Vicki turned to see Mary's mother turn ashen and

away against the blackboard. She caught the woman and eased her into a chair, holding her.

Mary ran up to her fainting mother.

"Mother! What happened? Vicki!"

"I don't know. Rub her temples," said Vicki, rubbing the woman's wrists.

Benjamin Verga hurried over and spoke softly to his wife. She opened her eyes then. Vicki, moving back, stepped on a small garment and then picked it up. Mrs. Verga had been holding the garment when she cried out. Had the little, embroidered, woolen dress caused her to faint?

"Where is it?" Mrs. Verga said in an anguished voice. "Benjamin—the dress, the same dress—"

Vicki handed the lobsterman the dress. It looked small and elaborate in his work-hardened hands.

"It's very like," he muttered.

"It's as I always said! Benjie, take me home. I'd better lie down. But bring the dress!" Dorothea Verga was almost hysterical. "We must not lose our second chance!"

"We won't, we won't. Not after all these years. Help me lift your mother, Mary. Bring her coat and hat, Vicki—can you put the coat around her?"

Between the three of them, they half carried Mary's mother home to the cottage. There she rested on her bed while her husband, with awkward kindness, brought her water and a sedative. Whatever significance the child's dress had, Mrs. Verga

was suffering a terrible shock. As if she had seen a ghost. Mary was examining the dress in a puzzled way.

"May I see, too?" Vicki whispered.

"It's fit for a little princess, isn't it? Except that it's old," Mary remarked, handing the dress to Vicki.

The tiny garment was of cream-colored wool, its entire bodice embroidered, in rather faded blue, in a distinctive bluebell design. Vicki had never seen a child's dress exactly like it; it might have been especially made. It would fit a two- or three-year-old.

Mary frowned. "I don't understand at all," she murmured.

"Girls," said Mrs. Verga from the bed. She struggled to sit up. "I'm sorry if I gave you a scare. It's all right, dears, I'm feeling stronger now."

Her husband stood watching her closely. His deep-blue eyes seemed younger than the rest of his face; he seemed to be remembering something.

"Mary, go to the closet," said her mother, "and in the back you'll find—"

"Wait," said Mr. Verga. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I have to see it, Benjie! I have to make certain! Besides, Mary has the right to know the whole story, sometime."

Mary looked from her parents to Vicki as if her world were falling to pieces around her. Slowly she walked to the closet.

"Wait!" her stepfather pleaded. "Your mother don't realize. This—this is no use. Why open an old wound, Dorothea? Why pain Mary too? It's so long ago. Better to forget."

"I've never forgotten! How could any mother forget!"

"Hush, my dear, hush. Vicki"—Benjamin Verga patiently turned to her—"where'd you get this child's dress? Where'd the welfare people come across such a thing?"

"Why—why, Boston Welfare told me they collect extra clothing from Ladies' Guild groups and church groups in towns all around Boston. Someone must have contributed the dress."

"Someone saved it." Mrs. Verga weakly tried to get off the bed. "But how did they get hold of it in the first place? I want the locked chest!"

"Please, Dorothea, rest. Mary'll get the chest."

Out of the closet Mary lifted a small wooden chest. Murmuring that she'd always believed it held merely souvenirs, she set the chest beside her mother. Meanwhile, Mr. Verga reached behind the mantel clock and brought out a key. Vicki began to feel she had no right to witness what might happen next. It was intensely private.

"Excuse me," she murmured. "Since you feel better now—"

"No, stay!" Mary's mother looked up quickly. "You're the one who brought the dress, and maybe

you know—I insist you have to stay. Benjie, can you turn this lock for me?”

The chest opened and Mrs. Verga lifted out a dress which was identical with the one Vicki had flown in. The same cream wool, the same distinctive bluebell embroidery. Mary and Vicki stared, while Benjamin Verga for an instant closed his eyes.

“You see?” Mary’s mother faltered, spreading the two dresses side by side on the bed. “There’s the proof. I always believed it! So did you, Benjie. You were the only one . . .”

“Mother, whose dresses are they?” Mary asked. “Were they mine when I was little?”

“One dress was yours.”

“Then why are there two dresses, Mother?”

Mrs. Verga started to cry. Mary was so shaken that Vicki put her arm around her to steady her. Her mother was unable to speak, so her stepfather had to tell her.

“You see, Mary, once you had a twin sister, but—but she was lost. In a shipwreck fifteen years ago, off Boston. Lost when she was wearing this dress Vicki brought— Ah, Dorothea, no use to weep. Let the past bury its dead.”

“But she may be alive and well! We don’t know! That’s what makes it so hard— My poor little Mary, don’t look like that.”

“I have a twin sister?”

"Had," Vicki whispered. But Benjamin Verga heard her and shook his shaggy head.

Mrs. Verga lay back on the bed, exhausted. The faraway expression which she sometimes wore filled her face; her eyes closed. "Maybe there's hope still," she said half to herself.

Verga motioned to the two girls, and all three tiptoed out of the room. "Best to leave her alone awhile," the lobsterman said. "Oh, my, my! Why did this have to happen?"

"Why, it's grand to have a twin sister!" Mary exclaimed, then bit her lip. "If I have—?"

Vicki felt somehow responsible, although it was not her doing that the telltale dress had been packed into the bale.

"If there's any way I can help—" she started.

"Let us do nothing, and say nothing more." Benjamin Verga seemed tired now from this ordeal. "Not right away, at least."

"But I want to know," Mary said urgently.

"You'll know, all in good time. This is a big thing, a hard thing. We'd better take it slowly. Vicki, you have to excuse me for not telling you the whole story, not today. I have no right to tell it, and it's been a long grief for Mary's mother."

Vicki perceived that he was requesting her to go. She offered her help again and went for her coat. Mary seized a sleeve, protesting:

"Please don't leave me with these big, haunting

questions in my mind. Vicki, how would you feel if, at seventeen years old, you suddenly learned that you had a twin sister?"

"I'd feel just as you do, Mary. What would you like me to do for you?"

The girl's pansy-brown eyes clung to hers. "I don't know. What can anybody do?"

"If I could stay on Fortune Island, we might be able to learn more facts and then figure out something. But I have to fly back to Boston—right away, in fact." Vicki glanced at her wrist watch. Mid-afternoon. "I don't want to do any night flying, even with lighthouses to guide me. Too risky in this unpredictable weather."

Mary walked with her to the plane. The mist was no longer blowing but, as Mary pointed out, the seas were too heavy for boats to venture out.

"I feel so alone," Mary said. "I feel cut off on this island."

"I'll write to you," Vicki promised. "And you write to me, won't you? Don't worry. Maybe you'll find you do have a twin sister."

She clambered into the plane, and, after the Greeley boys spun the propeller for her, she taxied down the pasture, turning for the take-off. In a few minutes the plane lifted into the air. As she climbed, she waved down to Mary. The last thing Vicki saw was her friend's dark hair blowing and floating in the wind like long strands of seaweed. It was strange to conjecture that somewhere in the world

another tall girl with dark flowing hair might be standing and unconsciously waiting, perhaps not knowing who she really was.

Or was Mary the girl who did not know?

The first thing Vicki did, on returning to Boston, was to look up newspapers of fifteen years ago. Searching through these, she found an account of a December shipwreck off Boston. It might well have been the disaster in which Mary's twin was lost, for no other shipwreck was reported for that year. The newspaper photographs showed survivors being carried on stretchers, and the account read:

STORM SMASHES THE *GULL*

FORTY PERSONS BELIEVED LOST
IN RAGING SEA; SHIP SINKS

SURVIVORS TELL OF ORDEAL;
SEARCH PARTIES AT WORK

Last night's storm destroyed the passenger ship the *Gull*, costing an estimated forty lives when the ship cracked wide open and lifeboats were swept away.

The *Gull*, a 200-ton steamer of the Northeast Coastal Line, plying between New York City and Portland, Maine, ran into winds of ninety miles an hour around midnight last night. The ship had safely run through a snowstorm on passing Deer Island light. About an hour later northeasterly winds reached hurricane force.

The *Gull* was unable to advance or to return to Boston, in the heavy seas and winds. According to sur-

vivors, the ship took a terrific buffeting and sagged steadily. By one A.M. the wheel and bridge were broken, making steering impossible. At two A.M. Captain John Andersen notified passengers that the ship's radio aerial had been broken. Their distress signal, sent by emergency wire and batteries, had not brought a single answer. (No S O S was received here, local radio stations say.) For an hour the doomed ship fought a losing battle with the storm. The captain ordered passengers and crew to abandon ship.

Half of the lifeboats were smashed or swept away by the storm. Women and children were placed in the remaining lifeboats. Five of these craft reached shore at dawn, with passengers suffering from exposure and injury.

How many persons went down with the *Gull* is not definitely known yet. Captain Andersen and most of the crew are missing. Several passengers were said to have leaped into the sea when a sixty-foot wave split the side of the *Gull*. The ship sank within three minutes.

A spokesman for the line asserts that no blame can be attached to the captain for starting out, since after the *Gull* touched Boston, there was only a light easterly wind and an overcast sky.

Search parties and Coast Guard planes will continue to comb the shipwreck area.

Vicki put down the old newspaper with a shudder. No wonder Mrs. Verga had felt stunned—fifteen years later!



CHAPTER III

A Letter

ALL THE REST OF THAT WINTER VICKI WONDERED HOW Mary Verga and her parents were getting on. Fortune Island had repaired its damage, news reports said, as had all that Maine area. The fishing fleet was active again, and by March newsreels showed sailboats being made ready on beaches for summer sports. But what Vicki most wanted to know—the story of Mary's twin sister and of Mary herself—she had no way of finding out.

She had written three times to Mary but received no answer. If Fortune Island had the facilities, Vicki would have telephoned or telegraphed. Her flight route on Federal Airlines was changed, and Vicki was not in Boston again after that fateful day. All she could do was wait—and wonder why Mary did not reply.

By spring Vicki felt thoroughly mystified. Every time she came home to Fairview, the first thing she demanded was her mail.

"Really, honey," her mother said, "you ought to allow for slow mail. Mail service to the island was irregular even last summer when the weather was perfect. So you can imagine what it is now with spring tides and storms."

"Delayed all these months? I hope that's the only reason I don't hear."

In New York, too, where she was based between runs, Vicki haunted the mail room at the airport. Mary might have addressed her in care of Federal Airlines. No letter turned up, however. In the New York apartment which Vicki shared with five other stewardesses and their housekeeper-chaperon, Mrs. Duff, she watched the mail deliveries until one afternoon Jean Cox asked:

"Why don't you go to work for the post office? Think of all the letters you could see!" Jean kicked off her shoes and wriggled her toes.

"You can't tell me it isn't a love letter you're watching for," Charmion Wilson teased gently. She was, as usual, doing the other girls' mending. To have a day off together was rare luck.

"I'd fly up to Maine, if it was me, and see for myself what's what," said Dot Crowley. Redheaded and decided, Dot was very good at telling other people what they should do.

"Don't you think I'd have flown up long ago if I had the time and wherewithal?" Vicki said. "I've never had such a heavy schedule as this spring. I haven't seen Tessa and Celia for two weeks. When

they're here, I'm flying, and when I'm here, they're flying."

"Federal's certainly keeping us busy," Charmion agreed, and nodded toward Jean who was falling asleep. "Mrs. Duff says the apartment has been so deserted and quiet that she's made friends with a mouse."

"Me, I'm off on the Miami run in two hours." Dot Crowley stretched. "Are you still on the New York-Memphis run, Vic? I had the Brazilian Ambassador and his wife aboard yesterday, and last week we carried a baby giraffe for a zoo."

"Don't boast," said Vicki. "All day yesterday I was personally responsible for a ten-year-old boy traveling by himself—the hungriest youngster I ever saw! He ate a box of doughnuts before I caught him, and howled when I was afraid to let him have more. I had to take him forward with the pilots to keep him quiet. Then he was so happy, he nearly burst."

They laughed as they compared notes and exchanged news of flying friends. Vicki enjoyed this chance to visit. Yet she felt restive. Perhaps Dot Crowley was right, as she often was. Perhaps the thing to do was to find time, borrow a plane, and hop up to Fortune Island. Bill Avery would lend her his Cub—except that she could scarcely ask Bill to let her monopolize his training plane. Well, Dean Fletcher, her Federal copilot and good friend, owned a Cub jointly with his brother, Bud. That one was down in Charleston, South Carolina, Dean's

home town. But he'd said that Bud was using it a lot.

"Shucks," Vicki thought. She could rent a plane. "Even so, my schedule is tight as a drum. Use my rest days to fly up to Maine? But if I don't rest, I won't be fit to be either stewardess *or* pilot."

With a sigh she acknowledged that the Fortune Island hop was out of the question.

One fine April afternoon Vicki came home unexpectedly to The Castle. She now worked the St. Louis-New Orleans run, and St. Louis was not far from Fairview. As a rule she just popped in on her family because, with flight schedules subject to change, her days off were unpredictable. Vicki alighted from the bus this mild afternoon, still in her blue flight uniform, and strolled leisurely past green gardens to The Castle's horseshoe driveway. The first tight peony buds were out. She paused to admire them and was startled when her mother called from an upstairs window:

"Vicki! Didn't you meet Ginny? Hurry and catch her!"

"Where? What's the matter?"

"At the bus stop. She just started downtown to mail you a letter special delivery—a letter from Mary Vergal. It arrived this morning."

"Thanks, Mother!"

Vicki dropped her overnight case on the grass and ran. How could she have missed Ginny? Her sister must have taken the short cut in back of the

high school baseball field. At the bus stop no one was in sight. No bus in sight, either.

"I don't want Mary's letter to travel all the way to New York—because goodness knows when I'll be in New York again!"

Fortunately Jack, Bill's mechanic, came along in Bill's noisy yellow convertible. Vicki hailed him and got a lift downtown. She was waiting on the steps of the post office when Ginny strolled along three-quarters of an hour later, holding the precious letter in her hand.

"Ginny! Where have you been all this time?"

"How did you turn up here? I thought you were in New Orleans! I stopped to have a soda at Feldkamp's with Tootsie and Dick. What's wrong with that?"

"When I was waiting and waiting! Let's have—"

"Now don't be unreasonable," Ginny said with a superior calm. "How could I hurry when I didn't know you were waiting?"

"What are we arguing about, anyway? Let's read Mary's letter."

They sat down unceremoniously on the post-office steps, tore open Ginny's envelope, then Mary's original envelope. Ginny, although eager to read the letter, of course had not opened mail which was not hers.

Mary's letter was written on paper torn out of a school notebook, in handwriting as flyaway as herself. It read:

"Dear Vicki—Your three letters came today, March the twentieth, all together. I hope you don't think I've been rude not to answer you, but there's been almost no mail deliveries here. You know how slowly things move on the island, especially during the winter months. Goodness knows when this letter will go out to the mainland, so, Vicki, please excuse the delay. I'm so happy to hear from you.

"I knew you must be wondering about us, after what happened that day. I stood there and watched your plane until it was just a speck in the sky. The Greeley boys thought I was crazy, but they didn't know what took place. We haven't told anyone on the island.

"My mother is better, but she is changed. I don't know exactly how to describe the change to you, Vicki. She used to be quiet and subdued. Now she seems excited, and she clings to Dad more than ever. Mother talks more than she used to, but mostly to Dad, not so much to me. She says she doesn't want to distress me.

"Mother did tell me one thing, though. She says it is all right for you to know. My twin sister and I were two-year-olds and we were wearing those 'bluebell' dresses when Jennifer was lost.

"You can imagine how strange I feel. I still don't know the whole story. I think and think about Jennifer.

"Mother has kept the dress you brought—Jennifer's dress, I mean. She wouldn't part with it for any-

thing. She hasn't shown it to our neighbors and won't tell anyone on the island. I don't understand why. She says it's because people will laugh at her. But why should anybody laugh at my mother?

"I asked Mother if she would tell somebody else, somebody like the Barrs? Mother said Yes, she would rather tell them than the neighbors, and maybe Professor Barr would have some good suggestions.

"That's one reason why I wish you and your family could come to Fortune Island again this summer. If you were here, I think things would start to happen—they generally do when you're around! The other reason is that I'd love to see you, and we could spend another happy summer together.

"My parents join me in best wishes to you all.

With love,

Mary"

Vicki and Ginny reread the letter all the way home on the bus. Just that one tantalizing bit of information—a missing twin named Jennifer, who disappeared fifteen years ago. Ginny was all for "doing something" right away. Vicki agreed, but what?

They showed the letter to their mother, who looked extremely thoughtful as she read it. When Mr. Barr drove in from State University thirty miles away, where he taught economics, he studied Mary Verga's letter in silence. The Barrs could talk of nothing else throughout dinner and the entire evening.

They were genuinely concerned about the Vergas. They liked and respected this island family whom they had met on last summer's vacation. Vicki and Mary's friendship had gradually brought the two families together.

One afternoon Mr. Verga had taken them all sailing in his power-driven lobster boat. It was a pleasant expedition until Ginny fell overboard several miles from the island. Mr. Verga with remarkable speed pulled her out of the deep icy water, unhurt. After that, the Barrs had felt indebted to the Vergas. More, they liked the quiet, proud mother, and Professor Barr had found in Benjamin Verga a philosophical man with whom to talk. Mr. Verga's book learning was scanty, but he had his own self-reliant Maine philosophy. Mr. Verga in his turn valued a man of learning. Many afternoons the two men had conversed together on the beach, while Mr. Verga mended his traps or painted his dory. "You wouldn't think," Lewis Barr had later remarked, "one could learn much about economics from a Maine lobsterman but Verga taught me several things the world would be better off for observing." So the Barrs and the Vergas had become neighbors and friends. The letter was the first news of the Vergas in a long time.

"What I don't understand," Lewis Barr said, "is why Mrs. Verga is so secretive. If she'd furnish us with some information, we could at least surmise whether Mary's twin is dead or alive."

"It's probably too painful for her to talk about,"

Betty Barr said. "Poor woman! I suspect someone has laughed at her before and that's why she dreads been laughed at now."

Ginny was indignant. "How could anyone laugh about a lost child?"

"People aren't always too understanding, dear," their mother said. "Vicki, wasn't there anything else—any clue you noticed when you flew up there last winter?"

Vicki ransacked her memory. "Only the locked chest. Mrs. Verga faithfully kept the dress . . . as if she never in all these years gave up hope. Oh, yes! She said to Mr. Verga, 'Benjie, you were the only one.'"

"The only one *what?*" Ginny demanded. But no one could guess. Guesses about what Mrs. Verga had meant were not enough, anyway.

"Mother, Dad," Vicki said tentatively, "do you suppose you might spend your vacation at Fortune Island again? I could join you for a few days at a time, whenever Federal lets me have rest periods and my vacation. What do you say?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" Ginny jumped up as if she might run upstairs and start packing at once.

"We-ll. I hadn't planned to spend quite so much for vacation this year," their father said. "If you three ladies think you can economize on other items, we might manage—"

"Oh, yes, Dad!" Vicki said gratefully. "I'll skip having birthday presents and Christmas presents

this year, if that will help." Finding a missing girl was more important than presents.

"We could trim our household budget," Betty Barr said. "I do feel it's important to see what we can do—if anything—for the Vergas. I know how I'd feel if one of my children had disappeared."

"Yes," Lewis Barr said somberly. "And you, Virginia?"

Ginny offered not merely to economize but to make and sell fudge with her next-door chum, Cookie, in order to raise funds. Mr. Barr did not feel that the latter was necessary, especially since Ginny sold most of the fudge to her own parents.

"Let me do some figuring tonight," their father said. "I think we can swing it."

Next morning at breakfast, Professor Barr announced that the family could go to Fortune Island. They could not stay for as long a time as last summer, but they were going. Soon.

"Thank you, thank you!" Vicki exclaimed. "I'll write to Mary right away. This may be the beginning of something wonderful—something terrible—oh, I don't know what!"



CHAPTER IV

Jennifer's Disappearance

MAINE WAS STILL COOL WHEN THE BARRS DROVE UP there in June, for summer comes late to the northernmost state. The first peonies and blueberries were out and lobsters heaped the market stands, but the corn was still not high and the trees looked like early spring. On Fortune Island, which the Barrs reached by motorboat, leaving the car in a garage on the mainland, it was downright chilly.

They were glad of a leaping fire at Aunt Lydia's Inn that afternoon and bowls of steaming chowder. They were assigned the same rooms as last year. Everything looked unchanged—the patchwork quilts on the beds, the dogs in Chub Lane, the gulls soaring overhead, the lean, hard-working fisherfolk. The men especially looked hewn out of rock.

“Even a gale can't uproot them,” Mr. Barr remarked. “I wonder how the gale affected the island's economy?”

Aunt Lydia reported that the fishermen and lob-

stermen had mended their gear and smashed boats, but bad weather had left them unable to work for many weeks. They could not afford to lie idle; they were working twice as hard now that sea and sky were calm. Down at the wharves, masts and sails of many fishing craft lay only from dusk till dawn. The Barrs on their twilight walk noticed Benjamin Verga's small boat rocking on the water.

"Well, our friend Verga must be at home," Lewis Barr said.

"Can't we go over now?" Vicki begged. "At least can't I run over to tell Mary we're here? She probably still hasn't received my last letter saying we hoped to arrive today. If she had, she'd have been at the wharf to greet us."

"Let's not intrude on these people, let's not rush them," her mother advised. "Remember, they're reserved, and we are outsiders."

"Mary would feel hurt to know that I'm on the island but didn't come right over to see her!"

"The Vergas probably have finished their supper by now," Ginny contributed.

Their mother sighed. "Very well. But don't intrude yourself in any way. This matter of a missing child is private, delicate. It may turn out that Mr. and Mrs. Verga won't really wish to tell us about it. I'd scarcely blame them."

Vicki did not stop to debate the point. She had already waited months to see her friend Mary. She ran off through the blue dusk, her footsteps sound-

less on the sandy road. Where the lane narrowed and turned, and a tall pine stood, she hurried up the path which led to the Vergas' cottage.

Vicki knocked. Mary came to the door, carrying her gray cat in her arms.

"Vicki!" she cried. She set the cat down and held out both hands to the visitor. "I didn't know you were coming *today!* Why, it's sooner than I'd hoped for!"

"How are you? And how are your parents?"

"They've gone over to the church for the evening. Come in! Is your family at the inn?"

The two girls quickly exchanged news. Vicki felt relieved that they were alone in the plain, homey room. She was able to ask a forthright question.

"Why, I'm sure my mother wants to talk to all of you," Mary said. "You know how she looks up to Professor Barr. So does my dad. See here!"

She showed Vicki a tin canister filled with special cookies which Mrs. Verga had baked in anticipation of the Barrs' visit.

So it was arranged for the two families to meet. The next evening the Barrs walked over to the Verga cottage. Mr. Barr carried tea and delicacies which Mrs. Barr had selected for their friends, and Ginny was bringing Cloud a box of catnip.

The Vergas received them cordially. Mrs. Verga was wearing her Sunday dress, and Mary, her cheeks brilliant with pleasure, had filled jugs and pitchers in the sitting room with wildflowers. As host, Ben-

jamin Verga in his weathered blue clothes put them all at ease with his wry, gentle comments on life on Fortune Island. His description of the way Widow Mowat had reacted to last winter's storm—she had gone out in the wildest of it to rescue her sheets from the clothesline—made them laugh. "Complained because she lost two clothespins. In a gale, mind you."

"That must have been quite a storm," Lewis Barr said. "You seem to have taken it in stride."

"Nor'easters never know when to stop," Benjamin Verga said calmly.

Mrs. Verga said shyly that her husband had predicted to within two hours when the storm would die down. "He's a weather watcher, a sea watcher. He knows the sea around here as well as a farmer knows his own back yard."

Mr. Verga brushed that aside. "The storm made our men idle, and we can't afford to lie idle and wait for better weather. Well, I'm having a good summer."

Mr. Verga was, the Barrs knew, a leader among the local men in courage and in his substantial earnings. He laughed and remarked that, although lobstering was a rugged way to earn a livelihood, he would not leave Fortune Island for anything.

"There's something about living on an island that's real satisfying. Living on an island is almost like having a kingdom of your own."

Mr. Barr nodded. "Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote something in the same vein."

Mary said eagerly, "Here, it's like being on a ship, you have space all around you, nobody can cut off your view—"

Mrs. Verga smiled. "Mary is romantic, and my husband, too. I'm afraid I'm not so romantic. We have to ferry in all supplies, and what with no electricity, I use an old-fashioned coal stove and kerosene lamps. I try to manage, be thrifty— What I mind most is that there's no high school here for Mary."

Mary, along with two or three other children of high school age, received instruction in high school subjects from the local minister and his wife. The talk turned to other subjects, to Mrs. Verga's fine needlework, then lagged. One important subject was on all their minds, but the Barrs did not feel it was their place to introduce it. Presently Mrs. Verga said, in her reticent way:

"I suppose Vicki told you that she brought us a— a remarkable dress."

All other conversation in the room ceased. With encouragement in her voice, Betty Barr said, "Yes, Vicki has told us a little of your story. She felt that you and Mr. Verga would not mind our knowing. But we don't wish to intrude—"

"Please understand how we feel," Lewis Barr said. "We're indebted to you for hospitality and kindness,

particularly to Ginny, last summer, and we're happy to help in any way possible. On the other hand, we wish to respect your privacy, naturally."

"It's up to Dorothea," said Benjamin Verga. "She can say what she wants to do. I'm standing by to help her."

Mary's mother looked gratefully at her husband, then at her sympathetic listeners one by one. "Where shall I begin? I want you to know the whole story, because, what with having children of your own, you could—maybe—"

"If there's anything we can do to help," Lewis Barr assured her, "we certainly will."

Mrs. Verga took a deep breath. "Well, you see, I—I lost a little girl." She choked and could not go on. They waited for her to master the old grief. Mary's eyes were wide open and shining like dark stars.

"Mother, you *think* you lost Jennifer?"

"Yes. I don't know, maybe I'll never know. It's always been a source of sadness to me that I couldn't have my two girls growing up together. Twins, at that. Maybe I can hope again, now that the second little dress has turned up. Well—"

Fifteen years ago, when Mary and her twin Jennifer were two years old, Mrs. Verga was the wife of Mark Bostwick. He was a kind man, in moderately comfortable circumstances, and was devoted to their twin children. He had bought some fine creamy woolen, and the twins' mother had made,

for their birthday, two bluebell-embroidered dresses. The bluebell pattern was one of her favorites.

Shortly before Christmas in that distant year, the young Bostwick family was traveling by coastal steamer from New York City to Portland, Maine. They assumed it was a routine voyage. The ship, the *Gull*, was small but seaworthy, and as for storms—well, the sail was only overnight.

Soon after, on that bitter cold night, northeasterly winds arose. The sea grew heavy. About midnight the winds reached hurricane intensity, and the waves became walls of water.

"We heard the ship creaking," Mrs. Verga related. "Mark remained outside on deck to see what might happen. I was asleep in our cabin with the twins when suddenly I was thrown from my berth. Mark came in to say we'd all better get dressed quickly. He said not to worry, but I could see he was worried. I put the—the dresses on the girls, and their coats and leggings—"

The *Gull* could not advance because of the raging winds and waters. Waves had smashed some of the lifeboats, but several remained intact. In the blackness of the storm, women and children were lowered from the rolling ship to the tossing lifeboats.

Mrs. Verga's voice trembled.

"There were hardly enough lights to see us over the side. I was carrying Mary, and Mark had Jennifer. The sailors lowered Mary and me on ropes—I wish I'd been able to carry both my children! Then

I—I looked up and held out my arms for Jennifer—someone called that she was dangling on another rope, being lowered.

“I—I couldn’t swear to what happened next. All I know is that a gigantic wave hit the bow of the ship like a clap of thunder. The beams of the flashlights zigzagged, as if the sailors holding them up there on deck had been knocked off their feet. I couldn’t see Jennifer anywhere. Our lifeboat pulled away fast—the *Gull* was capsizing. There was one more ray of light and I saw Mark struggling in the water—”

She could not go on. Mary put her arm around her mother. Benjamin Verga took up the story.

“Mark Bostwick was drowned. I know that for sure, because a surfman, a friend of mine, worked at the lifesaving station at the end of Cape Cod. He reported a lot of wreckage was washed up on the beach the next morning. Four or five days later some mangled bodies were thrown up by the sea. One of ’em was Mark Bostwick. They were able to identify him—I’m sorry to have to drag all this out, Dora.”

“And Jennifer?” the Barrs asked, after a pause.

“Well, they never found the body of the little girl,” Benjamin Verga said.

“But how did her bluebell dress turn up?” Vicki exclaimed. “Could the sea have torn it off her? Not likely, is it?”

“No. You tell it, Dorothea.”

Their lifeboat, the mother said, had circled as

near to the sinking ship as they dared. One survivor, a boy of twelve, was found swimming nearby and pulled aboard. "I asked the oarsmen to find my little girl, and they did try, but—oh, there was wild confusion and a terrible sea! It's a wonder our lifeboat stayed afloat. The people in it were suffering from cold and exposure, Mary was shivering like a leaf, the oarsmen couldn't wait any longer. When they began to pull in the direction of land, I—I don't know, I guess I went out of my mind, leaving Jennifer behind somewhere in that—" Mrs. Verga blew her nose. "I'm sorry. Even after fifteen years, it's hard to talk about it."

The Barrs expressed sympathy, and waited a few minutes for her to recover her poise.

The next thing Mrs. Verga—then Mrs. Bostwick—knew, she and Mary were in a hospital. It was near Boston. She was told that the *Gull's* shipwreck was a big disaster, with many lost and injured; she was told that her husband was drowned. When she asked the date, she was astounded. It was spring, and the voyage of the *Gull* was in December. She had been suffering from amnesia: the shock of seeing Mark Bostwick drown had, for a time, mercifully blotted out her memory.

"When I asked for Jennifer, the doctors and nurses thought I was still hysterical. They said I only had one little girl, Mary, and that I was *imagining* a second child. I tried and tried to explain. No one would believe me. They said I was still delirious

from shock and gave me sedatives so I would stop 'having hallucinations about a second child.' ”

“Why, that’s terrible!” Mrs. Barr said. “How could they?”

“We mustn’t be too hard on the hospital people, ma’am,” said Benjamin Verga. “To the best of their knowledge, there wasn’t any twin to Mary. The rest of the survivors were taken to different hospitals, but nobody reported a two-year-old girl off the *Gull*. So my wife’s doctors and nurses thought they were telling her the truth. They did the very best they could for her.”

Vicki pricked up her ears. “Which hospitals were the survivors taken to?”

“I’m not sure,” Mrs. Verga said. “I forget. Anyway, maybe it’s true that Jennifer never reached a hospital, never even reached land. Because I did try to find her, with Benjie’s help— But that came later on.”

Mrs. Verga remained in the hospital near Boston for a year. Besides suffering amnesia and shock, she was seriously injured. Mary, too, had broken bones which took a long while to knit. After a year she and Mary were transferred to a second hospital, where they remained for six months. During that time Mrs. Verga made inquiries about Jennifer through the hospital’s social worker, but no word, no trace, of the missing twin was found. Mrs. Verga had no relatives nor in-laws to turn to for help, and she waited

impatiently for the day when she herself could make a search.

When the second hospital discharged her and Mary in June, a year and a half after the shipwreck, she was advised that the first essential was to build up her health. She had no family and no funds, except for the surprisingly little which Mark Bostwick's insurance had yielded. On the advice of the hospital's doctors she went to the country to rest. She chose a small Maine island because it was quiet and inexpensive. It happened to be Fortune Island.

In the cool bracing salt air of Maine that long-ago summer, Dorothea Verga regained her strength. As she made friends among the islanders, she ventured to mention what lay heavily on her mind: Jennifer. But these restrained people could not believe her half-hysterical story about Mary's twin lost in a shipwreck. No one, that is, except Benjamin Verga. The lobsterman had lost a brother at sea, and he had heard from the surfmen about the wreckage of the *Gull*. Mr. Verga believed her, and helped her.

"He was the first person since the shipwreck," Mrs. Verga said gratefully, "who believed me when I said I had two daughters."

It took all summer for her to grow strong enough to attempt a search. She worried that so many months had gone by without action, but if Jennifer had survived, she must be *somewhere*. During the month of October, she and Mr. Verga mapped out a

plan of search, and the lobsterman worked extra hours to raise money to finance the search. All this took more time. In November the twins' mother set out, leaving small Mary with neighbors on Fortune Island, and for two months she searched.

"Did you ask the police for help in locating Jennifer?" Vicki asked.

"Benjie and I talked that over and decided not to go to the police until I'd tried. You see, with everyone else doubting my story, how could I expect the police to believe it?"

First the twins' mother visited various orphanages near Boston, where the survivors had been brought. With only hope to go on, she described a dark-haired girl child whom she had not seen for two years. She did not find Jennifer in any of the orphanages. She learned that some of the orphans were living in temporary foster and boarding homes. The orphanage authorities, while kind and helpful, saw no reason to send this troubled woman to see the many dark-haired, four-year-old girls residing in boarding homes. Nor did they have any record of such a child being adopted. Then the orphanage people checked with the hospital near Boston and learned Mrs. Verga had had "delusions" that a second child existed. They were sorry, but they were unable to help her.

From orphanage to orphanage the mother trudged, in Boston and its outskirts, all in vain. Finally, discouraged and very tired, she gave up.

"Did you visit *every* orphanage in the Boston area?" Vicki asked.

"Almost every one. I missed one or two, but I telephoned those. I couldn't learn anything, though." Tears filmed Mrs. Verga's eyes. "I did try. I tried hard for two months."

Defeated, she gave up hope and returned to Fortune Island. Soon after, she and Mr. Verga were married. Benjamin Verga formally adopted Mary and henceforth loved her as his own daughter.

"And did you think then that Jennifer was—well, really lost?" Mrs. Barr asked.

"Yes, I came to accept the fact that she was drowned as her father was. The police presumed so. Yet in my heart I never could believe Jennifer was dead. I suppose it wasn't reasonable of me—except that her dress has turned up now!"

"I told her," Mr. Verga said, "no one ever has to give up hope. She was feeling pretty discouraged, so I went to the police myself right after we were married and told 'em the facts about the *Gull*. Like most everybody else, the police wanted to know, was there ever actually a second child? But my wife pleaded so hard—they wouldn't turn away a mother who was terribly upset—"

The police, who deal with many kinds of people, were sympathetic about Mrs. Verga's insistence that she had a second daughter. The police did not really believe her; indeed, Mr. Verga, even Mary herself, could not swear that a twin had existed! Nor could

Mrs. Verga produce any evidence of a second child.

"Not even a birth certificate for Jennifer?" asked Vicki.

Mrs. Verga explained. She originally had had birth certificates but these were lost in the shipwreck. When she wrote to the little village in Canada where the twins were born, she was unable to get duplicates or even a helpful reply. The elderly physician who attended the twins had since moved away, no one knew where, and could not be traced. Possibly he was dead. There were no neighbors who could testify twins had been born, because the Bostwicks had been transients passing through the village on one of Mark Bostwick's business trips at the time.

Hence, without even birth certificates, the police had nothing but the mother's word to go on. Though dubious of her strange story, they agreed to keep open minds and look into the question.

They did search. Preliminary investigations at the steamship line led to nothing. Questions to survivors netted little.

"The police did all they could," Mr. Verga said, "but by then it was two years after the shipwreck, remember. The police did question people who'd been on the *Gull* that night, what few they could find to ask. Those survivors had a hard time remembering much, all they remembered was confusion. So, well, the police search didn't come to much, either. In fact," Mr. Verga said sadly, "the police

told us, 'If there ever was a second child, she's probably dead by now.'"

"So gradually," Mrs. Verga said, "we stopped mentioning Jennifer. Whether she was dead or alive, she was lost to me. The minister told me it was best to try to forget and live in the present. Best for Mary, he said."

"So that's why you never told me, Mother," said Mary. "But now that we've found Jennifer's dress—don't you see what it means? Why, Jennifer is alive! Don't you think so, Vicki?"

"Hold on," said Mr. Verga. "We're only hoping. The dress doesn't prove anything for certain."

Lewis Barr said hesitantly, "I think it does prove that the child was found. Someone found her, the person who saved that dress."

"Why, Mr. Barr, that's what I've been saying ever since Vicki brought us the dress!" Mrs. Verga exclaimed.

"Of course," Mr. Barr continued, "whether Jennifer is alive *now*, or where, is a question."

"It's worth trying to find out," Betty Barr said.

Benjamin Verga shook his head. "I don't like for my wife to go through all that heartache again."

"Benjie, you know I'll never rest now unless we look for her!"

They discussed together how such a belated search, with no known leads or boundaries, might be made. The police could not be asked to help because after a given number of years, usually seven

years in the case of a missing person, a case is considered closed. As for going to a detective agency, the Vergas could not afford the fee and the Barrs were not in a position to assist financially. Welfare agencies? But these were already overworked in helping the sick and the needy.

"We'll have to do it ourselves," said Mary, and glanced significantly at Vicki. "Vicki here flies around a lot—around the whole United States—"

"I'd offer in a minute," Vicki said, "if I had any idea where to begin."

Mrs. Verga and Mary looked at her with profound appeal. "We can really hope now that the dress is found. Please, Vicki? There's no one else we can ask, and no one else who's as free to travel as you are."

"Please find my twin sister for me," Mary said. "Please try."

Vicki hesitated. Everyone in the cottage sitting room was looking at her, waiting for her answer. Neither of her parents had objected: they must be as moved as she was. And it was true that through flying she was free to do what few other people could attempt.

"How strange that after fifteen years," Vicki said wonderingly, "you're given a real reason to hope again. Yes, I'll try to find Jennifer."



CHAPTER V

Some Serious Doubts

NOW VICKI UNDERSTOOD SOMETHING SHE HAD SEEN several times in Maine, home of many seafaring people. Atop many a barn and cottage stood a weather vane, a wood or metal cutout figure of the Angel Gabriel in his long white robe. With trumpet to his lips, the angel swung round in the wind, blowing his call to Judgment Day.

How many lost at sea did these Gabriels commemorate? Did Gabriel, atop Aunt Lydia's Inn, blow his trumpet for Jennifer?

"Or is that girl alive and well somewhere, if only I can find her?"

Vicki would not have admitted it, out of loyalty to the Vergas, but a doubt troubled her. Had there actually been a second daughter? It was all too possible that Mrs. Verga, stunned by the shock of events, still cherished a nightmare belief. Perhaps if Vicki could talk to Mr. Verga privately, he might admit some interesting things. Did he genuinely be-

lieve that Jennifer existed or had existed, or was this a soothing lie he pretended for kindness' sake?

On the other hand, how explain away the existence of *two* bluebell dresses? Would two identical dresses have been made for one child?

"Not likely," Vicki thought. "Possible, though . . . I won't try to decide on the basis of what I imagine. I'll let the facts decide."

Vicki started right out on her search, using the balance of her brief vacation. Her mother tried to persuade her to spend a day or two swimming and sailing off Fortune Island, first. Even Mary said, "After a fifteen-year wait, a day or two more won't matter." But Vicki was eager to get started. She had two or three first steps planned out clearly. On talking them over with her father, he agreed that the logical place to begin was with the steamship company which had owned the ill-fated *Gull*. For Lewis Barr, too, considered it possible that there never had been a twin.

So Vicki left the island, lovely as it was in summer weather, and traveled to Portland. The steamship company had an office there.

At first Mr. Cody, who interviewed her, did not understand what she wanted.

"But that was fifteen years ago, young lady. Why would anyone be interested in a ship's records of that long ago? I can assure you that our company did everything possible to compensate for losses incurred by the *Gulls*—"

"I'm not trying to stir up a scandal, Mr. Cody. I'm not here to present any claims, either. It's just that I'm trying to trace someone who was lost in that disaster."

"Everyone has been accounted for, years ago. You don't doubt my word on that, do you? You're on a wild-goose chase, Miss Barr."

"Maybe I am. Just the same, I'd like to try."

"Well, it may take us a day or two to trace those records for you."

"I'm prepared to wait, Mr. Cody."

She waited all day in her Portland hotel, not wanting to risk going out and thus missing Mr. Cody's telephone call. In the middle of the afternoon the steamship company notified her that they had located the *Gull's* records and she could see them now.

The ship's water-stained logbook with its nautical terms meant little to Vicki, except that it miraculously had been salvaged. What she wanted to see was the *Gull's* passenger list for that particular night in December.

"Here we are. The B's. Bostwick."

Yes, there were the names. Mr. and Mrs. Mark Bostwick, of New York, and daughter. Not daughters.

"Something wrong, Miss Barr?"

"Do you mind if I glance quickly through the entire passenger list?"

She read all the names, searching for another

Bostwick or for another family with "daughters." There were none. The name of Jennifer did not occur.

"You were right, Mr. Cody. It was a wild-geese chase. Thank you very much for all your trouble."

No use in asking a busy man whether a passenger agent some fifteen years ago had made an error in writing "daughter" instead of "daughters." Vicki knew that small steamship lines, offering overnight runs, did not keep as complete or exact records as did transatlantic lines, so there was no way of checking whether this was an error. Such errors were common enough.

An error? Or had there been only one daughter? Yet there were the two dresses. The thought of these sent Vicki on to her second stop, to Boston, and the first hospital where Mrs. Verga and Mary had stayed.

Mercy Hospital's records were exact, and the assistant superintendent who talked to Vicki actually remembered the survivors of the *Gull*.

"It was my first year in hospital work," Mr. Keene said, "and the *Gull* shipwreck was my first experience of a big disaster. Naturally I remember. Yes, I remember the woman you describe. She kept calling pitifully for a child, a second child, I believe. Of course there was no such child. She was suffering from a severe emotional disorder, due to shock."

"Why do you say 'of course' there was no such child," Mr. Keene?"

"Look at the record for yourself." The administrator opened a yellowed folder. Vicki read through the case histories for Mrs. Bostwick and Mary, from the time they were admitted, through a year of treatment. No mention was made of Jennifer, although the record noted that Mark Bostwick had been drowned and the patient so notified.

"Miss Barr, you seem to believe that this second child actually did exist?"

"Yes, Mr. Keene. Some evidence recently turned up to make us believe so."

The administrator frowned, thinking. "If that is so, we misjudged the poor woman. Though what we could have done to find her second child, I don't know. We did secure news of the husband and we did try to locate relatives, as the case record shows. She probably *was* delirious."

Vicki did not argue. "I understand that survivors from the *Gull* were taken to several hospitals in this area. Perhaps if I checked with those hospitals—"

"A good idea! Have you the complete list of those hospitals? Wait here, Miss Barr, and I'll try to find it for you."

After half an hour's effort, Mr. Keene and a secretary succeeded in rounding up from old records the list of five hospitals.

"I doubt if you'll find any second child, Miss Barr."

"I'll try at least. Thank you very much."

During the next two days Vicki visited these hos-

pitals in and around Boston. Her visits discouraged and baffled her. The fifteen-year-old records showed two types of entries: those persons who recovered enough to give their names and addresses and some information about themselves; the other shipwreck victims had been brought in unable to speak and had never regained consciousness. Nor had their sea-torn clothing yielded anything to identify them. They had died unknown, except as relatives claimed them.

"The Bostwicks had no relatives," Vicki recalled, perusing the records of the last hospital on her list. "There's another thing! Suppose a two-year-old was brought in, not so badly hurt but unable to remember her name? Or not able at two to speak clearly enough to make her name understood?"

Vicki looked with fresh interest at the anonymous entries. "Man, aged about thirty, name unknown, died of injuries." "Unknown woman, transferred to Mercy Hospital for emergency surgery." "Girl, aged about two—" Here was what she was looking for! "Girl, aged about two, no identification, no claiming relatives. Treated here during December and January for exposure and shock. Transferred February 2 to Twin Maples Convalescent Home."

Twin Maples! It sounded like an omen of good hope. Vicki eagerly asked the hospital's office manager for the address of Twin Maples.

"That was a small place, quite a way out in the country," he said. "Never was much of an institu-

tion, and we haven't heard anything of it in years. Not since I've been with the hospital. This all happened before my time, you see. Sorry I can't be of more help, Miss Barr."

"The Twin Maples address is a great help!"

Now she was beginning to get somewhere. The child who was sent to this small convalescent home fifteen years ago might not be Jennifer. Yet there was a good chance it was Jennifer. No other unidentified two-year-old girl survivor was listed on any of the hospital's records.

Making train and bus arrangements to reach Twin Maples took time. Fortunately, Vicki still had a few days of her vacation left. She started from Boston early the next morning, for, although Twin Maples lay only fifty miles from Boston, it was in remote farm country and difficult of access. If she'd had a car or better still, a plane, it would have been much easier.

By noon, after much transferring, Vicki reached a small settlement consisting of a church, a general store, and a gas pump. In the store was a crabbed old man in overalls who regarded this newcomer with suspicion.

"Can you tell me, please, where Twin Maples Convalescent Home is? I was told it's near here."

"What in thunder d'ye want to go out there for? There's nothin' there for anybody to see."

"I *must* go. Is there anyone here who can drive me over?"

Shrewd Yankee eyes looked her over, studying her citified clothes. "I can drive ye over. That'll cost a dollar an' four bits. But ye're a darn fool to go."

The storekeeper locked up his store and led Vicki to an ancient Ford. The contraption looked as if it would not run. It made a reluctant fifteen miles an hour, chugging up a road between fields of corn. Presently the old man jerked the car to a stop.

"There she be," he said, waving vaguely.

Vicki stared. "I guess I didn't make myself clear. I want to see a convalescent home—you know, a sort of hospital."

"Ye're lookin' at Twin Maples Convalescent Home right now. I told ye ye're foolish to come."

Vicki could scarcely believe her eyes. In the center of an overgrown plot of land, charred ruins of a sizable house were half smothered in grass. The only signs of life were birds nesting in a broken chimney.

"Burned down years ago," said the storekeeper. "Nigh on to fourteen, fifteen years ago. That'll be a dollar an' a half."

"But where did they go?" Vicki demanded. "Tell me all you know and I'll pay you double."

"Won't do no good. I told ye all I know. There ain't anyone in the county knows more'n that. Leastways, not after all these years. Ye're a crazy kind o' girl to come way out here for nothin'."

"I guess I am," Vicki said, paying him. She added to herself that her journey had not been entirely

"for nothing." She had had to explore the only possibility uncovered so far.

If today's trip came to nothing, that was disappointing but she would not be discouraged. At least she had gained a hint that Jennifer—well, possibly Jennifer—might have been rescued and given hospital care, and grown well enough for a convalescent home. If that were true, it would be happy news! Vicki realized it was possible that, in the confusion of rescue work, Mary and her mother might have been taken to one hospital, while Jennifer, unidentified, might have been taken to another hospital. Mrs. Verga during her long period of amnesia could not have known or remembered such a thing.

Yet *was* it true? The ship's passenger list read "daughter." Mrs. Verga's insistent voice, and the memory of *two* dresses, came back to Vicki. A troubling contradiction . . .

"I believe Mary's mother," Vicki decided. "Two dresses versus the ship's list—I believe that list is in error!"

Vicki debated, during the poky ride back to Boston, whether to write to the Vergas about what she had learned so far. Learned? Conjectured, rather. "I don't want to raise their hopes in vain," Vicki thought. "I'll just write that my search is really started now."

The next step, if she could not trace Jennifer, was to trace the person who had obtained and—for what reason?—saved the bluebell dress.



CHAPTER VI

The Bluebell Dress

"WHY, YOU'RE ASKING FOR SOMETHING THAT'S NEXT to impossible!"

"It's urgent that I find out who contributed that child's dress," Vicki pleaded with the worker at Boston Welfare. "Believe me, I wouldn't bother you busy people if it weren't of the utmost importance."

"But garments are contributed from towns all over the state! It's like searching for a needle in a haystack." The social worker abruptly changed her tone. "You flew for us last winter, didn't you?"

"Yes. I flew food and clothing to Fortune Island."

"Well, you surely deserve special consideration. The difficulty is, Miss Barr, that we don't keep a detailed inventory of clothing that's contributed to us. We haven't time to do all that bookkeeping."

"Would it help if I described this particular dress? It was in the bale I flew to Fortune Island."

"No, I— Wait a minute. Mrs. Potter was in charge

of receiving, sorting, and packing the clothing into bales. It's doubtful that she'll remember six months later, but I'll take you downstairs to her office."

Mrs. Potter, a patient woman, searched her memory and asked Vicki several questions. But she could not recall the bluebell dress. What's more, she never had known which clothing came from which towns.

"I do recall one thing, though, if it's of any help to you. There are churches in a few towns where the ladies specialize in sewing warm clothes for children. You know, at some Ladies' Guilds they roll bandages and surgical supplies, and some church sewing circles concentrate on layettes, while most of them simply collect usable shoes and clothing. Well, as I say, at Malden and Windham and Hightower, and I think at Hamilton, the Ladies' Guild specializes in *children's* clothing. Does that help you?"

"Yes! It's a lead, Mrs. Potter. Windham, Hightower," Vicki said, intrigued by the names. "Where are they?"

"I'll give you directions for reaching all four towns. Then if you don't succeed, come back here and we'll try again."

"You're very kind, Mrs. Potter."

"That's because I see you're troubled about something. Whatever it is, I wish you success."

Vicki consulted the calendar and her purse. Both vacation time and funds were running short. She had four Massachusetts towns to visit! Vicki chose

to go to Windham first because it was the nearest.

Windham was a manufacturing town, with a picturesque old mill and church, but otherwise a gray sort of place. Summer rain poured down the morning Vicki arrived. The whole effect was so dispiriting that she did not check in at the one commercial hotel, not wanting to stay in this town.

"I'll find out whether it will be worth while to stay, before I do anything definite."

She checked her overnight case at the small railroad station across the street from the hotel, and asked the ticket agent to direct her to the Ladies' Guild.

"Which Ladies' Guild, miss?"

"Why, the church."

"*Which* church? Windham has three."

So Vicki trudged in the rain—for Windham's one taxi was nowhere in sight—to one church after another, hunting up members of the three Ladies' Guild groups. In the first church she had a talk with the sexton. He was busy dusting the pews and seemed to be somewhat annoyed by the interruption.

"*Our* ladies make the clothing they give away," he told Vicki with a superior air. "They only give fresh, clean clothing. Oh, once in a while, if somebody gives a good, heavy overcoat, they'll accept it and have it dry cleaned. But Mrs. Walter don't approve."

"Is Mrs. Walter in charge? Where can I see her?"

"You never heard of Mrs. Walter? Well, you don't know much about Windham, I can see that. She lives over on Chestnut Street."

"What number, please?"

"Twenty, but she's gone to Canada for a vacation. Come back next month. Anything else you want to know?"

Vicki managed to worm out of the sexton the name and address of Mrs. Walter's co-chairman. A telephone call to this lady, who was co-operative, made it clear that the bluebell dress—or anything like it—was unknown to this particular Ladies' Guild group.

At the second church, a big, festive luncheon was in progress. Vicki was embarrassed, and explaining briskly who she was and what she wanted, offered to return later in the day. The young woman who rose to speak to her was gracious.

"We'd be very glad to have you stay. This is a benefit luncheon"—she named a modest price—"and won't you need lunch, anyway? You can sit next to me and we can talk. I'm Miss George."

So Vicki enjoyed home-cooked fried chicken and a very agreeable companion.

"Children's clothes?" Miss George wrinkled her handsome brow. "We do collect 'em. Now tell me in detail about the dress in question."

Vicki described the dress exactly.

"I'd scarcely remember," Miss George said, "if I'd ever seen such a dress. Perhaps the others—

Grace, Emily, did you see, last fall or last winter, a child's dress with bluebell embroidery?"

Up and down the long luncheon tables the question traveled. Since the entire Ladies' Guild was present, Vicki listened to the answers with some hope.

"No, Miss Barr, I'm afraid not," said her hostess at last. "Will you accept angel-food cake and iced tea instead?"

Vicki thanked her and wished wryly that the subject of her search could be as easily come by as a piece of cake. However, the friendliness of these women encouraged her, and after expressing her thanks for their help, she went on her way.

The brief summer shower had ceased, and the walk to the third church was pleasant. There the sexton took her to see Mrs. Butler, the minister's wife.

Vicki expected to be ushered into a rather stiff sitting room. Instead, Mrs. Butler was in the back yard, helping her two small sons give their collie dog a bath. She was a cheerful, capable young woman and thought hard while Vicki told her about the odd dress.

"Well, Miss Barr, I myself have never seen or even heard of such a dress. Do you know what it sounds like to me? It sounds like Hightower—the Hightower Ladies' Guild. Through my husband I'm in touch with church people in various towns, and I do know that several women in Hightower are fine

needlewomen. That bluebell embroidery, that's just the sort of thing they'd love."

"That's the sort of lead I'm looking for!"

"It's only a shot in the dark, of course."

"I planned to visit Hightower, anyway, but after what you've told me, I'll go there next. Thank you so much, Mrs. Butler."

Because rail and bus connections were awkward, it was simpler to return from Windham to Boston and then start out afresh the next day for Hightower. If only she had Dean's or Bill's Cub! She could fly the distance in a straight line, "as the crow flies," and be in Hightower within the hour.

"This is the last time I jog along on buses and local trains," Vicki promised herself. "After tomorrow, I'll make this search with the help of a plane—if I have to beg, borrow, or buy one!"

She reached Boston that evening, fuming at the waste of time. A letter from Mary was waiting for her at the Boston hotel.

"I don't know whether to be glad or sorry that you're searching for my twin sister," Mary wrote. "Mother is hoping so hard that I dread to think of her disappointment in case the search doesn't work out. Dad and I keep telling her that you can't perform miracles. Your parents took us all for a drive on the mainland last evening, and tomorrow Ginny and I are going to fish for crabs."

Vicki smiled. She almost wished she, too, were loafing on Fortune Island—except that tomorrow

morning, unknown possibilities lay ahead for her in Hightower.

She found a gem of a little town on the sea, a place of peace and dignity. Along its streets, paved with rosy-red bricks, sat trim white colonial houses amid wide green lawns and gardens. Three-hundred-year-old trees arched over the entire town, and from the pebbly beach came the quiet sound of water. Vicki looked with delight from her taxi window. Hightower Inn delighted her even more. This was like visiting in someone's home of the earliest days of the nation. She registered, with her attention really on the hand-hooked rugs and the gleaming brass andirons of the huge fireplaces and the bright bouquets of roses and peonies everywhere.

"Is the church open on a weekday afternoon?" she asked the middle-aged man who operated the inn.

"There is always someone at the church," he said, rather severely. "The church is never closed. You are welcome to visit it."

He gave directions how to reach it. Vicki thanked him, requested that her overnight bag be taken to her room, and started right out.

As usual in New England towns, the church was the finest white building of all. Vicki looked up, up, up along the pure line of its Christopher Wren steeple, remembering its definition as "a finger pointing to heaven." Someone was playing the or-

gan. Vicki pushed into the cool, white, shadowy interior of the church. Only the organist, practicing half out of sight in the loft, was there. Vicki went out into the sunshine again and debated between trying a side door which stood open, or knocking at the rectory. The open door looked welcoming. So she rapped and stepped in.

Three older women sewing at a table glanced up. They were motherly looking but formal and reserved, and their eyes traveling up and down this stranger were sharp.

"I beg your pardon," Vicki said. "I need some advice, please."

"Come in," the women said kindly.

"Mrs. Butler of Windham sent me here," Vicki said. "It's about some needlework."

The mention of Mrs. Butler's name seemed to make the women less guarded. They listened with interest to Vicki's request. When she described the dress, all three grew excited.

"If that isn't the strangest thing! There's only one child's dress with the bluebell design that I've ever seen!"

"And you know whose *that* is," the second woman said significantly. "It was beautifully made."

"Then the dress does come from Hightower?" Vicki breathed.

"Yes, but— Maybe we have no right to talk about it to a stranger. It isn't our dress, after all. Maybe she won't care to talk."

Why were the women so evasive? Did they know some secret about Jennifer?

The eldest of the three adjusted her glasses and studied Vicki. "You said Mrs. Butler sent you here? Are you a friend of hers?"

Vicki replied truthfully that the minister's wife scarcely knew her well enough to vouch for her.

"Then maybe you'd better tell us, Miss Barr, why you're so interested in this dress."

Vicki hesitated. She did not feel she had the right to tell the Vergas' secret.

"Well, if you won't tell us, how can we tell you?" the oldest woman said tartly.

The plump one of the three looked amused. "My, don't we all sound mysterious! The fact is, Miss Barr, that the person who contributed the embroidered dress has been ill and should not be upset or alarmed in any way."

"I'm not going to alarm this person," Vicki insisted. "I merely want to ask whom the dress belonged to and where it's been for fifteen years."

"Oh— Why didn't you say so?" the eldest woman rebuked her.

Vicki had been trying to say so. The plump one's eyes twinkled as she sedately wrote out a name and address for Vicki. It read: Mrs. Martha Brown, 15 Maple Road.

Mrs. Martha Brown was a spare, erect, plain woman who lived by herself in a white salt-box cot-

tage. She explained to Vicki over a glass of lemonade that she was a retired nurse, a child's nurse.

"Yes, I contributed the dear little dress. I don't blame you for being inquisitive about it. I never saw such beautiful handwork before, either."

Vicki asked if the dress had belonged to one of Mrs. Brown's children.

"Dear me, no, I never had any children of my own. Mr. Brown—he passed away many years ago—used to say a child's nurse could mother dozens of children, even if we had none of our own."

The warmth and kindliness of her answer made Vicki like Mrs. Martha Brown very much. On seeing that the questions did not alarm her, Vicki ventured to ask a few more. She was careful not to mention Jennifer by name, nor the shipwreck—she did not want to put the answers in her hostess's mouth. Martha Brown answered readily, as if she were lonesome, and glad of someone to chat with on this warm afternoon.

"Yes, that bluebell dress was given to me about, let's see, twelve or thirteen years ago. I was taking care of their little girl, and she had outgrown the dress, so Mrs. Lane gave it to me."

"Mrs. Lane," Vicki repeated thoughtfully. "Twelve or thirteen years ago." That left two or three years unaccounted for.

"You'd think a mother would want to keep a dress like that for a souvenir, wouldn't you? But Mrs. Lane didn't want it. She gave it to me, and I washed

and ironed it, and put it away in my cedar chest. You know how saving we New Englanders are! Never does harm to be thrifty. Many a child has got good use of the clothes I saved. Even the little dress came in handy, last winter."

"Did *you* keep the dress as a souvenir of the Lanes' little girl? You kept it a long, long time."

"I loved the fine handwork. Sentiment, too, I guess." Mrs. Brown smiled and rocked for a moment in silence. "She was a sweet little thing. Very shy. The parents were crazy about her."

"What was her name, Mrs. Brown?"

"Jane? Jean? Jenny? It's Jean."

Vicki's heart skipped a beat. Those names were awfully close to the name of Jennifer. Could it be simply coincidence? She had better write to Mrs. Verga and ask whether the lost twin had worn an identification bracelet or locket with her name or initial on it, or something similar. Yet the hospital report on "an unidentified two-year-old-girl" had mentioned no name at all.

The pieces of this puzzle certainly did not match up!

"Mrs. Lane gave me all of Jean's outgrown clothes, as a matter of fact," Martha Brown was saying. "For other children to use. The girl was four years old, the winter the Lanes were here. Didn't stay long, just came for a short rest, said they wanted to be very quiet. This isn't a resort town, you know. Mr. Lane happened to find it in the course of

his travels—in his kind of work he traveled a lot—and naturally everybody who sees Hightower admires it! Well, anyway, they engaged me to help take care of their little Jean for the time they were here, and that's how I met them."

Vicki interrupted to ask what Mr. Lane's work was, and what his first name was.

"Mercy, I don't recall his first name. His work, now. He's been with one of the big oil companies. I couldn't tell you exactly what he does, something technical. . . . No, I don't know which oil company. My memory is like a sieve these days. Here, have some more lemonade!"

Vicki accepted with thanks, wishing Mrs. Martha Brown would not talk in circles.

"What did little Jean look like, Mrs. Brown?"

"Dark hair and dark eyes. Real pretty. Never looked like either of her parents, though. To tell you the truth, Miss Barr—" The child's nurse hesitated. "This is a funny sort of thing to say."

"I won't repeat anything you tell me," Vicki promised.

"Well, I always wondered a little whether Jean was Mr. and Mrs. Lane's own daughter."

"You did!" Vicki nearly jumped out of her chair. "Why did you suspect that she might not be?"

"For one thing, Mrs. Lane didn't know much about taking care of the child. If you have a four-year-old, even if you've turned it over mostly to nurses—you'd be handier than Mrs. Lane was. Also,

if it's your own youngster, you go ahead and spank if necessary. *They* handled the child as if she was made of porcelain. Ah, they were good, kind people. And then, as I say, Jean didn't look a bit like either of them."

"*Hold tight,*" Vicki cautioned herself, "*this may be the right girl, but it's twelve or thirteen years since Martha Brown obtained the bluebell dress.*"

"Mrs. Brown, where did the Lanes go after their vacation in Hightower? Surely they gave you their address?"

"They went abroad. Yes, Mr. Lane's work took them all the way to Europe."

Vicki was disappointed enough to feel tears smart in her eyes. Just when she had found the source of the dress, an ocean barred her way.

"To Europe. And then where, Mrs. Brown?"

"To China, I heard. But I did see them a few years ago."

"You did! Where?"

"Right here in Hightower. They came back, oh, two or three—it was three summers ago for a short vacation. They paid me a visit," Mrs. Martha Brown said proudly. "Jean wanted to meet her old nurse. She was quite a young lady by that time, fourteen and quite tall."

Three years ago! Where were the Lanes now?

"Tell me—exactly what does—did—Jean look like?"

Mrs. Brown raised her eyebrows at Vicki's excite-

ment, and placidly described Jean Lane. According to her, Jean resembled Mary Verga enough to be her twin sister.

Vicki leaned back in her chair, stunned and happy. Jennifer, now Jean Lane, *was* alive! There no longer was any doubt that she was the lost twin.

"All I have to do now is find her," Vicki murmured, not listening to Mrs. Brown's chatter. "All! Find a family with a common name, whose father's business keeps them moving around all over the world."

Vicki implored the nurse to try to remember Mr. Lane's first name, or the name of the oil company, or any news she had heard of them recently. But Mrs. Brown's memories were blurred, she had worked for so many families, and she'd had no news.

"Now you tell me something, Miss Barr. Did the little bluebell dress go to a nice family? I hope they appreciate it."

"They appreciate it more than I can tell you. Thank you very, very much. You've been a dear."

And Vicki went back to the inn, wondering what to do next.



CHAPTER VII

Detective Work

AFTER A GOOD, SIMPLE SUPPER AT THE INN AND A stroll along moonlit streets, Vicki went to her room to do some thinking. She had learned so much, so suddenly from Martha Brown that she needed to sort out her whirling thoughts.

First, she settled down at the maple desk to write Mary and the Vergas a letter. They were entitled to know, as promptly as possible, that as recently as three years ago Jennifer was alive and well and in good hands. It was a curiously difficult letter to compose: to tell them every detail, every supposition, would leave the Verga family in an agony of suspense. Vicki simply wrote the main facts, adding, "Please rely on me to do my very best to find Jean Lane." Then she added a question, directed to Mrs. Verga, and requested that she send the answer care of Federal Airlines in New York. The question was, had the lost twin on the night of the ship-

wreck worn anything bearing her name or initial?

It was curious that Jennifer was now called Jean, thought Vicki, as she took her letter downstairs to mail. Both names began with the letter J. Still, it could be merely a coincidence. Or had the lost child worn some article marked with a J? On the other hand, suppose that the Lanes did know who Jennifer Bostwick was? Did Jean know her true identity? That is, had they ever told her? For, if the Lanes did know, and had not hunted up Jennifer's mother, they might not want Jean to be "found" after all these years. But it was unthinkable! Martha Brown had said that the Lanes were kind, intelligent people. Vicki decided that the initial J of both names was a relatively unimportant detail, at least at this stage of the search.

Back in her room, she fell to musing about Jennifer Bostwick who had become Jean Lane. Did Jean know or suspect the truth? How strange that an angry sea had carried her from one life and identity to another! Apparently the Lanes had adopted her—Martha Brown thought so, and the facts of the shipwreck made it a logical supposition.

But *when* had the Lanes adopted Jennifer? Where had they found her? The convalescent home had burned down; if Jennifer were the unidentified, unclaimed child of the hospital records, where had she been taken after the fire at the convalescent home? There was a two-year gap between the hos-

pital's record of Jennifer at age two and Martha Brown's seeing her in Hightower at age four. Two lost years . . .

"I can't answer those questions now," Vicki realized. "They'll have to wait. The main thing is to find Jean. If I can do that, I may discover the answers along the way."

She fretted over the puzzle just the same. It occurred to her that during the two years Mrs. Verga had amnesia Jennifer must have moved around a great deal. Where? Then, when Mrs. Verga made her belated search, the child had vanished. Even the police, after that two-year gap, had not been able to locate Jennifer.

"Of course they couldn't!" Vicki said aloud as the truth hit her. "Because by the December that Jennifer was four, two full years after the shipwreck, the Lanes took her abroad with them."

Vicki took two pieces of paper. On one she wrote the dates Mrs. Verga had mentioned. On the other she wrote the dates Martha Brown had mentioned. They tallied.

Slipping off her shoes, wriggling her toes, Vicki began to concentrate in earnest. A great deal had developed since the discovery of the bluebell-embroidered dress! Granted it was an unusual and beautiful dress. One *would* think, as the nurse had remarked, that a mother would want to keep such a dress. Had Mrs. Lane wanted to get rid of it because

she did not want Jean ever to ask questions about the telltale dress?

"Oh, I'm probably imagining too much," Vicki told herself. "If the child had outgrown the dress, and they were about to travel abroad, Mrs. Lane probably couldn't take along excess baggage. Martha Brown said Mrs. Lane gave her all of Jean's outgrown clothes. So that's that."

Travel abroad . . . Europe . . . China. The Lanes certainly had lived in far-flung places. Even if they had been in the United States three summers ago, when the nurse saw them here in Hightower, were they still in the United States? People like that, accustomed to traveling often and at short notice, might have left the country again in the meantime.

The enormity of the task of finding the Lanes stunned Vicki. They might be in Asia Minor or Jean might be ten miles away at a girls' school, for all Vicki knew. All she could do was to follow systematically what few slim leads she had. Really she had only one lead: the fact that Mr. Lane was, or had been, in the oil business.

Think hard about that, Vicki told herself, try to imagine what a man in the oil business is like and does. Well, he'd be a traveler, which she already knew; he'd probably be in comfortable circumstances, which Martha Brown had implied; he'd probably be a busy man. Think of a busy, world-traveling man here in this quiet little town of High-

tower. Wouldn't he feel isolated and out of touch, even though on vacation? Wouldn't he try to remain in touch, and perhaps handle a transaction or two? Where in Hightower would he do that?

"The bank," Vicki said to herself. "I'll visit the town bank first thing tomorrow morning!"

That night she went to sleep feeling more settled in her mind than she had since the bluebell dress first turned up.

Hightower's business district consisted of one street of small colonial buildings, with shining windows and creaking screen doors. Vicki passed a bakery, a general store, a barber shop, a gas station, a movie theater, and came to the bank on the corner. It was busy in there, and Vicki had to wait her turn to see Mr. Dewitt, the manager.

"Yes, Miss Barr, what can I do for you?" Mr. Dewitt was a portly white-haired man who looked as if he would rather be outdoors fishing on this fine summer's day.

"I wonder if you could help me locate a Mr. Lane who—"

Mr. Dewitt's telephone rang. "Excuse me, Miss Barr." He answered and a conversation followed. Mr. Dewitt hung up and turned to Vicki. "Sorry. A Mr. Lane?"

"Yes, he and his wife and daughter vacationed here three summers ago. He's in the oil—"

The telephone rang again. Mr. Dewitt turned away a second time, while Vicki waited. He hung

up, apologized, and prompted her. "He was in what?"

"In the oil business. Or I should say, he was connected with an oil company."

"Lane. Lane. Oh, yes, I remember. He came in here a few times for bank drafts for business purposes, and we had some interesting chats together. Very interesting, indeed."

The banker was able to tell Vicki a great deal about the Lanes. He had met Mrs. Lane, too, and their pretty teen-age daughter. A striking girl, he said. They were visiting Hightower three summers ago, just after their return from Europe. Mr. Lane came to the bank at first with Martha Brown, and he came later alone. Having nothing to do in this quiet town, Mr. Lane chatted with the banker.

"Very interesting to hear about the oil business," Mr. Dewitt said to Vicki. "Of course I know something about oil speculations as part of my work in the bank, but Mr. Lane, you see, is a geologist. His job is to locate oil through soil tests. That's what led him to travel in out-of-the-way places."

"What oil company was he with?" Vicki inquired.

"I believe those drafts were made out to— By the way, Miss Barr, for what purpose do you wish this information?"

Vicki explained that she was trying to locate the Lanes, and their daughter in particular. Mr. Dewitt looked convinced, but his telephone rang for the third time.

"Just one of those mornings," he said cheerfully to Vicki. "I *think* it was the National Petroleum Corporation, if I remember correctly. Their main office is in New York City. But it may have been some other company. Hello!" he said into the telephone, and waved aside Vicki's thanks.

She waited a few minutes longer, but Mr. Dewitt advised her that this was a long-distance call and she had better not wait. She returned to the inn, packed, paid her bill, and caught the first train back to Boston.

In Boston Vicki headed homesickly for the airport. No more poky traveling for her! Availing herself of the stewardess' privilege of free rides on her airline, Vicki caught a plane to New York. Red-headed Dot Crowley was the stewardess aboard; she gave Vicki a snack lunch, with all the ceremony due a sister stewardess. Vicki was congratulating herself on saving precious time when an appalling thought struck her.

"I forgot to ask the Hightower banker what Mr. Lane's first name was!"

Now the soaring plane seemed slow. They had barely landed at La Guardia Airport when Vicki ran to a phone booth. She emptied most of the contents of her purse into the coin receiver after placing a call to Mr. Dewitt at the bank in Hightower, Massachusetts.

She heard the distant phone ringing and ringing. Then she glanced at her watch. After four o'clock,

and banks closed at three. But the employees were usually there until five. No one answered.

"Darn it!" Vicki hung up. "The more hurry the less speed. Well, maybe I can still make it to National Petroleum's office before they close for the day."

She reached the oil company's door just as it was being locked up. Well, her inquiry wasn't one that could be taken care of in a few minutes before closing time. Tomorrow would have to do. In the meantime, Vicki wanted to look up the names of all the oil companies having offices in New York City. She found a staggering number of them.

Dot Crowley complained Vicki was a poor companion that evening. They were the only stewardesses grounded tonight in their New York apartment.

"Usually you're good company, Vic. Tonight you're about as gay as an owl."

"Sorry. I'll play canasta with you if you like."

They played, but Dot grumbled that Vicki made all kinds of mistakes because she was not paying attention.

"If you had only three more days left of your vacation," Vicki said, "and some urgent business to take care of, you might be a little dreamy, too."

Vicki knew, when she went downtown to the Grand Central area of New York the next morning, that locating the right Mr. Lane, among the many oil companies, was going to be a big job. If only she had his first name! Before leaving the apartment she

had again telephoned to the bank in Hightower. The reply came back:

"Mr. Dewitt has left for a three-week vacation."

So here she was, in the imposing office of National Petroleum, asking a member of the personnel department about a Mr. Lane. The man she talked to obviously thought the young blond girl, with her vague questions about names, dates, and places, was not to be taken seriously.

Nevertheless, he consulted a file cabinet and after a few minutes pulled out a card, then a folder.

"Yes, we have a Mr. Lane. In fact, we have two."

This was more than she had counted on.

"The Mr. Lane I'm looking for is a geologist."

"Hm. Well, these records indicate one is a geologist and the other is a field man. There's not very much difference in their two functions. Can't you give me a more definite description, miss?"

"The Mr. Lane I am trying to find was with your company—or rather, with an oil company—twelve or thirteen years ago."

"Yes, we had a Lane ten or twelve years ago. His initials are H. A. Wait, here's his first name. Harold."

"Oh, thanks! But what about the other Lane?"

"He's in National's employ at the present time. Is your Mr. Lane still with us?"

"I don't know," Vicki replied lamely.

"Humph. Well, the second Lane's first name is John, and I can give you an address for him." The

personnel man wrote down an address in Chicago. "That's fine," Vicki said. "Have you an address for Mr. Harold Lane, too?"

The man looked over the card. "Nothing except one in China, if you want that. Or a New York hotel several years ago."

Vicki was in no mood to laugh at his jokes. She ventured one more question: could he tell her the respective ages of Harold Lane and John Lane? The man, who had already returned the folder and card to the file, grunted, "The records don't say."

Vicki did not believe him. He simply did not want to be bothered with any further questions. Well, there was no way to make him tell her. Vicki thanked him for his trouble and left, consulting her list of oil companies.

What a long list! If she were obliged to visit every single one, it would take hours, more likely days. Couldn't she inquire by telephone? It was worth a try.

Three calls to three oil companies convinced Vicki that no business firm would give out information concerning its employees to an unknown person on the telephone.

She visited the office of the Texas Star Oil Company. They did not have, never had, any geologist or other field employee named Lane. She went to the Consolidated Oil Company. No, no man named Lane was known there. As Vicki worked her way

slowly down the list, she began to feel dazed. By the middle of the afternoon her feet seemed to be made of lead.

“If it weren’t for Mary and Mrs. Verga I’d give up!”

But she did not give up. For three days Vicki trudged from office to office. She barely covered the list by the last precious day of her vacation. Had the effort been worth while? She did not know, but was heartened by one discovery.

At the Lehigh Oil Company she was told that two of their field employees were named Lane. One was Mr. Theodore R. Lane of Memphis. The other was Mr. Carlton Lane of St. Louis. Both were older men—old enough to be a man with a seventeen-year-old daughter.



CHAPTER VIII

Which Mr. Lane?

FORTUNATELY THE CHIEF FLIGHT STEWARDESS, RUTH Benson, reassigned Vicki to the New York-Chicago run. Since one Mr. Lane lived in Chicago, that was fine.

It was fine, too, to be back in her blue flight uniform, going up and down the plane aisle seeing that the passengers were strapped in for the take-off. Dean Fletcher was copilot today, with Captain Frane as senior pilot, and that pleased Vicki. After the many strangers she had been interviewing, it was good to be teamed up with an old friend like Dean.

The plane skimmed off the runway like a powerful bird, mounting high into the summer sky as even an eagle never could. The roar of the engines sounded like an exultant song to Vicki. Passengers' questions and requests and getting trays of lunches kept her busy. Even so, she could steal moments to

look down on fields of fleecy clouds and out into the boundless blue.

After the Detroit stop, she carried hot black coffee forward to the two pilots. Captain Frane merely nodded as usual. Dean smiled broadly and slipped his earphones back a little, in order to talk to her.

"How are you?" he shouted over the engine roar. "Where've you been?"

"Maine—Boston— How're you?"

Dean nodded, grinned, and said, "See you in Chicago," and returned his full attention to the instrument panel.

Vicki touched his sleeve. "Will you go on an errand with me in Chicago?"

Dean nodded, as she knew he would. A solid citizen, her friend Dean. She would be glad of his stanch presence when she went to visit Mr. John Lane. To tell a man that you, a stranger, were inquiring about his adopted daughter was a ticklish undertaking.

They made a perfect landing in Chicago, exactly on the stroke of four. Vicki checked through the empty plane while the two pilots completed their reports in the hangar. Then the crew car came for them, to drive them from the airport to their downtown hotel. Vicki always felt a thrill of pride walking across the airfield between her two pilots, all of them in trim blue uniforms with silver wings on their lapels. She might not be much of a pilot, not yet, but she held a place in the great industry of

aviation. The second ranking industry in the United States; only steel came first.

Dean noticed her pride. He smiled down at her and said, "Me, too."

After dinner—for Vicki did not want to confide the Vergas' story in front of Captain Frane—she talked to Dean alone. They found chairs in a corner of the hotel lounge and relaxed. Dean, tall and lean, stretched out his long legs, nearly knocking over a potted palm.

"Whew! I'm tired," he said. "You look pretty tired yourself, Vic."

"All right, I'll admit it. I spent my vacation sleuthing instead of resting."

Dean turned his keen gray eyes on her and waited. He never asked questions; he was too considerate and reserved for that. Not like happy-go-lucky Bill Avery! Vicki wondered which of her two flying friends she liked best. She decided she liked them both, each for his own qualities. Dean would give her more reliable help in the search for Jennifer, though.

She told Dean the curious story, and what she had learned so far. Saying it aloud, her findings did not sound like much. Dean's silence was discouraging, though his sympathy for the Vergas matched hers.

"You have a difficult search ahead of you, Vic," he said. "What if the right Mr. Lane happens to be dead? Or retired, so that this oil-company connection no longer applies?"

"I don't know. I just have to try to trace that family."

"Let's hope your Mr. John Lane is in Chicago tomorrow and not miles away on some oil field."

The flight team was free the next day, Saturday, until three P.M., when they were assigned to the return flight to New York. Vicki thought she had better telephone John Lane tonight and try to make an appointment with him for tomorrow morning. Finding his name in the telephone directory, she reached him, apparently, at his apartment.

The voice on the other end of the wire was curiously reluctant.

"I won't take up much of your time, Mr. Lane," Vicki said. "I'm not trying to sell you anything. I only want to ask you—"

"I don't understand who you are, or who sent you," Mr. Lane replied.

"I told you, my name is Vicki Barr, flight stewardess on Federal Airlines. I'd be so grateful if you'd talk to me just a few minutes tomorrow."

"Can't you tell me on the telephone? Why not? . . . Well, all right. I'll see you at the National Petroleum office on Michigan Avenue tomorrow morning at ten. But don't try to make any scenes! I won't stand for it!" Click went the receiver.

Vicki remarked cheerfully to Dean that apparently they were going to visit an eccentric character.

John Lane turned out to be a nice-looking, wary young man about twenty-five years old. The minute

Vicki saw him, she was disappointed. He was far too young to have an adopted daughter seventeen years old. It must be John Lane's father whom she was seeking.

"I'm sorry to trouble you like this, Mr. Lane, there seems to be some mistake. If you could tell me where your father—"

"My father!" The young man looked suspiciously from Vicki to Dean. "What is this? What are you two up to?"

They were astounded at his reaction. Both Vicki and Dean tried to explain at once, but John Lane grew remarkably excited.

"If you've come to interfere, you're wasting your time! Leave my father out of this."

Was she interfering? Yes, Vicki supposed she was, walking in on people's private lives like this. She floundered, not knowing what to say next. Dean came to her rescue.

"Miss Barr only wants some information about a young girl."

"I'm not going to tell you a thing. As for my father, if he doesn't like Peggy, that's too bad!"

"Peggy? What Peggy?"

Vicki and Dean stared at John Lane. He stared back angrily at them and burst out:

"I'm not going to marry Ella! I don't care if she is the daughter of our family's oldest friends. I'm determined to marry Peggy, and you can go back and tell my father so!"

"But we don't even know your father, Mr. Lane!"

"Huh? Didn't my father send you? It would be just like him."

"No, no, no. We don't know your father. We're not interested in Peggy or Ella," Vicki sputtered. "We're trying to locate a girl named Jean, or Jennifer Lane. Your sister, perhaps? Or your cousin?"

"My sister? You must be plumb crazy! I haven't any sister or any girl cousins, and I never heard of anyone by that name."

Dean looked as if he were choking with suppressed laughter. "We've made a mistake. We're very sorry, Mr. Lane. Come on, Vic, let's get out of here."

"And you can go back to Peoria and tell my father—" The young man was still defying them as they went out the door.

In the hall Vicki paused for breath between giggles.

"Oh, my goodness, we certainly upset the poor fellow. What a mix-up!"

"Want to fly down to Peoria?" Dean asked with a straight face.

"No, thank you! That was enough."

It was not until the end of the following week that Vicki was again back in Chicago *and* had a full day off. Dean Fletcher was not a member of her crew this time. She was sorry, because she planned to visit Mr. Carlton Lane in St. Louis on her day off,

and she wanted Dean with her. It was not a good idea to go calling on strangers unescorted. Perhaps Bill Avery could meet her in St. Louis and go with her. She'd ask him.

Vicki made two long-distance telephone calls, one to Bill who said, "Sure, pigeon, yes!" and one to Carlton Lane who said, "I will be happy to see you tomorrow at noon." This Mr. Lane's voice was crusty and distinctly elderly. Perhaps she was on the right trail this time.

Bill met her at the St. Louis airport. Vicki had got a free ride down from Chicago on a Federal plane which had a vacant seat, and Bill flew his Cub over from Fairview. They had a happy reunion for all of five minutes, while Bill waited to pay his tie-down fee for the Cub.

"How's everything at Avery Airport?"

"Just fine, honey. The field is always crazy busy in summer." Bill took tremendous pride in his modest airport which he had built up singlehanded, with some help from Vicki. "What's all this about lookin' for a Mr. Lane?"

So Vicki told Bill the story as they rode along in a bus from the airport to the downtown area of St. Louis. They were heading for Mr. Carlton Lane's hotel, and a very prim, fastidious, resident hotel it was. No one in the hushed lobby appeared to be under sixty. Mr. Lane, whom the desk clerk pointed out to Vicki and Bill, looked as leathery and dry as the geology manual he was reading.

"Mr. Carlton Lane?"

"I have the pleasure of addressing Miss Vicki Barr?" The elderly man rose courteously. "And—?"

"Mr. Bill Avery, Mr. Lane."

Mr. Carlton Lane extended his hand to each in turn. It felt to Vicki as dry as a piece of parchment. Vicki thought with misgivings that he did not look like a family man, that a family man would not be living at a hotel. But then, Mr. Lane might be stopping there only temporarily in the course of a field trip.

"Well! I must say it's very pleasant to see two young people in this fusty lobby." Carlton Lane had a surprisingly merry glint in his old eyes. "I do miss the presence of young people."

That sounded encouraging. "What about your own—" Bill started, but Vicki put her hand on his arm. Bill was far too blunt.

"Well, Miss Barr! You are much younger than your manner on the telephone led me to believe. You're young enough to be my daughter."

"Speaking of daughters—" Bill started again. This time Vicki gently kicked his ankle. He turned full around to her and said, "Huh?"

"You see, Mr. Lane—"

"I trust you two are not in any great hurry? I would enjoy your having lunch with me."

Bill looked hungry. Vicki answered in great haste, "You're extremely kind, but we couldn't impose on you. No, really, Mr. Lane."

"Then do you mind if I order my own lunch in the meantime? I always have it at twelve thirty. Office hours, you know. Also doctor's orders."

The bellboy summoned the dining-room manager, who came into the lobby to take Mr. Carlton Lane's order. Vicki thought she would burst with impatience while he enunciated:

"Two soft-boiled eggs, please, boiled three and a half minutes. Not more, not less. Two slices of toast, *no* butter. A cup of tea and one, just one, bran muffin."

Was this man Jean's father? If so, he wasn't a very companionable father. Vicki felt a burst of sympathy for Jean.

"It's so hard to get home cooking in a hotel, Miss Barr."

"Ah—yes, Mr. Lane. I hope you won't mind my asking you a rather personal question. I'm trying to find a young girl named Jean Lane. I thought perhaps she might be your daughter."

The elderly man began to laugh. "Well, well. That's a funny one! How old is she?"

"She's seventeen."

"I have no daughter, Miss Barr."

"Your niece, then, possibly?"

"I have no kith or kin. I'm entirely alone in the world. Between you and me I'm glad of it. Relatives can be a blasted nuisance."

Bill could keep quiet no longer. "Do you know *anybody* name of Jean Lane, sir?"

"Why, yes, my mother's name was Jean. She's in heaven, I trust. That isn't any help to you, is it? I'm sincerely sorry. Ah, Mother was a wonderful woman! I can remember her as clearly as I can see you before me. A fine figure of a woman, beautiful hands—"

Bill nudged Vicki in the midst of Mr. Lane's reminiscence. "I'm starvin'," he whispered.

"Nobody in the world could sing the way Mother did. She was the leading soprano of our choir. Played the melodeon, too. And Mother's cookery! I can still taste—"

"Speaking of cookery," Vicki edged in, "won't your three-and-a-half-minutes eggs be overdone? We mustn't detain you any longer."

"Ah, yes!" Mr. Carlton Lane rose with an anxious look toward the dining room. "Very considerate of you. Thank you."

"We're the ones to thank you," Vicki said, "for your time and kindness."

She and Bill fled outdoors into the sunshine.

"Well, *he* sure isn't father material," said Bill.

Privately she was glad for Jean's sake that Carlton Lane was the wrong Mr. Lane.

Getting to Memphis, while based in New York and assigned to Chicago, took some doing. Vicki accomplished it by trading runs with tomboy Jean Cox.

"I don't particularly like switching you girls

around," said Ruth Benson, their Chief Flight Stewardess and good friend. "When I make up a schedule, I expect you to stick to it."

"But you'll switch us, won't you?" Jean Cox teased.

"Please?" said Vicki.

Their stunning-looking boss sighed. "Yes, I will. As if you imps didn't know I would. All right, Vicki, off you go to Memphis."

"Got a best beau there?" Jean Cox wanted to know.

"I doubt it," Vicki answered. "Mr. Theodore R. Lane is an elderly field man for Lehigh Oil and that doesn't sound too alluring."

The trouble with Theodore R. Lane was that he was elusive. Once in Memphis, she located his address and telephone number easily enough via the directory. She arrived in the evening and telephoned immediately. Her preliminary telephone call got her nowhere. A man answered and said he was Theodore Lane. But when Vicki gave her name, which he did not know, and said she wished to ask him some questions, the man hung up.

When she telephoned again the next morning, a woman answered. Mr. Lane was not at home, she said, and she could not say when he was expected. Vicki asked, "Is Mr. Lane out of town on a field trip?" but the woman hung up without replying.

The third time Vicki telephoned, an hour later, she was told, "There's no Theodore Lane here."

By then it was time to go to the airport for the flight back to New York. Aloft, Vicki performed her duties, and as soon as she could, sat down on the jump seat. There, at the rear of the cabin, with one eye on the buzzer signals, she puzzled over those telephone calls.

Obviously Theodore R. Lane of Memphis had been scared off at the prospect of answering questions. She must have put the matter awkwardly. Exactly what had she said to him?

"I told him my name," Vicki reviewed, "but my name couldn't mean anything to him nor startle him. I told him I had obtained his name from the Lehigh Oil office in New York. Then I mentioned 'questions,' as tactfully as I could, and that's when he hung up. I don't understand it."

A passenger buzzed for the stewardess and Vicki went forward. There was no use in worrying about the matter of the elusive Theodore R. Lane, nothing she could do, until the next flight brought her to Memphis again.

At the stewardesses' apartment in New York, a letter from Mary had arrived. Mary answered the question Vicki had asked when she wrote from Hightower: Had the lost twin worn anything with her name or initial on it? No, wrote Mary, apologizing for the slowness of mail deliveries to and from Fortune Island.

The question and answer no longer mattered

much to Vicki. So it was just a coincidence that Jennifer had been renamed Jean. That was a minor detail now that she was involved in the thick of the search.

Mary also wrote, "Finding my twin will probably take a long time, won't it?" Vicki rather guiltily consulted the calendar. She was moving as fast as she could, and she had given almost all of her two-week vacation to searching. The Vergas had been waiting from early June to mid-July, five weeks now. She still had no definite, encouraging news to tell them.

"The poor Vergas! The waiting must be hard for them. I won't waste a moment once I'm in Memphis."

Two mornings later Vicki was back in Memphis with a free rest day. This time she did not telephone Theodore Lane but went directly to 112 Wilson Avenue.

The Memphis streets were blazing hot in mid-July. Vicki thought of the cool salt air up north around Fortune Island. She wished her parents and Ginny could remain there; they were returning this week to Fairview, and Illinois in the summer was blazing, too. Not as hot as this flowering southern city, though. Fanning herself with her hat, Vicki descended from the bus at Wilson Avenue.

No. 112 was a dignified, rather run-down house. Surrounded by a dense growth of trees and elaborate flower beds, it was rather difficult to approach.

Vicki made her way under shadowy trees along a winding path. Although the windows were open, she saw no one around, not even a dog.

Vicki rang the doorbell and waited. No one answered, so she rapped with the brass-eagle knocker. Still no one answered. Had Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Lane left for the day, at only ten in the morning, leaving the windows open? Or perhaps had they only gone marketing? Neighboring houses were not near enough, screened off by trees, for Vicki to see anyone to ask. Or were the occupants of the house simply evading callers?

She rang again, knocked again, and waited five minutes. Ten minutes. She decided to venture around the yard and the side of the house, and wished Dean or Bill were with her.

No one was in the garden, but in the back yard Vicki was startled to see an older man dozing in a canvas deck chair. She took a good look at him. He was about sixty, plump and rosy, jolly-looking, not at all formidable, at least asleep.

Vicki coughed. The man stirred. Vicki coughed again and the old fellow opened his eyes, staring directly at her.

"And who might you be?"

"Mr. Theodore Lane?"

"Yes—that is, no—who *are* you?" He started clumsily to climb out of his chair, on the defensive.

"Now, Mr. Lane, I'm no one to be afraid of."

"Who's afraid of you?" He grew even pinker.



No. 112 was a run-down house, surrounded by dense trees.

"You're that Barr person who's been phoning me, aren't you? What do you mean by poking into our affairs?"

Vicki couldn't help it, he looked so like an offended kewpie that she started to laugh. She sank down on the grass, laughing, and said, "Honestly, Mr. Lane, I'm only looking for Jean. Jean Lane. Do you know her?"

"Why should *I* know her?"

"I thought she might be a member of your family."

"Now you leave my family out of this, you little squirt. Here I am, about to retire on a pension and—and I *told* my wife I bet Lehigh Oil would do this. What do you want to know, anyhow?"

Since he would not talk directly about Jean, she had to establish his identity.

"Well, sir, would you mind telling me whether you were with Lehigh Oil Company, or some other oil company, about twelve or thirteen years ago? You went to Europe, then, I believe?"

He looked at her solemnly. "Lehigh Oil knows danged well where I was twelve or thirteen years ago. Don't see why I have to tell *you*."

"Well, if you didn't work for them twelve years ago—"

"I did!"

Vicki swallowed hard and said pleasantly, "And then you worked for an oil company in China?"

"See here, what are you trying to dig out?"

"You *are* Mr. Theodore R. Lane of Lehigh Oil, aren't you? Or aren't you?"

"Wha-a-at? Now you've got *me* all confused." The plump old man wiped his perspiring face. "Let's start over. I'm Theodore Lane, all right, unless you've got me so mixed up that I don't know *who* I am."

Vicki bit her lip to keep from laughing. "If you'd just tell me what you know about Jean—"

"Suppose you just tell me what you're up to about my pension!" he snapped. "I'm entitled to my pension. After all my years of hard work, I don't aim to be done out of it!"

"Pension? I don't know a thing about your pension. I'm not even here on behalf of the oil company. Look, I can show you my identification."

He studied her solemnly a long time. "Then what are you investigating me for? You're a worse nuisance than that gabby smart aleck that Lehigh's insurance company sent around. I declare! My wife and I promised ourselves we wouldn't let another one of you pests on the premises."

"So that's why you dodged me," Vicki murmured.

"And look at you! Yammering in my ear on the telephone, sitting here on my grass— Why, I—I—I—"

Suddenly, simultaneously, they broke into peals of laughter. Mr. Lane shook like jelly and Vicki laughed so hard she was breathless.

"Nope, young lady, I don't know anyone named

Jean Lane. We have a daughter, but she's nearly forty years old and her name's Lucy. Satisfied now?"

Vicki was satisfied. She struggled to her feet, apologizing for her intrusion.

"Never mind, we had a good laugh, didn't we?" the old man said. He plucked a fine rose from the bush and handed it to Vicki. "To show we're parting as good friends, hey?"

It was a perfect rose. But it provided no clue in her search.



CHAPTER IX

News from Strangers

BY THE WEEK END VICKI WAS BACK IN NEW YORK, AND relieved to be there. For she knew she would have to make a second visit to the office of the National Petroleum Corporation. Having started out with a list of four men named Lane, and having discovered three of them to be the wrong man, Vicki now pinned her hopes on the fourth Mr. Lane.

This one was Harold Lane, or H. A. Lane, who had been with the oil company some ten or twelve years ago, and for whom the personnel man had been unable to give her a recent address. True, he had mentioned that Harold Lane stayed at a New York hotel some years ago, but Vicki saw little or no point to inquiring at the hotel at this late date. Hotels housed so many transient guests that their records were not as detailed as the oil company's would be.

She was not eager to approach National Pe-

troleum's personnel man again. He had not been very accommodating. Still, she must try.

Vicki dashed downtown and forgot in her zeal that New Yorkers on a hot summer Saturday go off to the beaches and woods. The big marble lobby was empty; her footsteps rang out. Only a bored elevator man, running the one lighted car in the ranks of closed elevators, 'sat in the lobby looking at a newspaper.

"Lookin' for somebody, miss? Nobody's here on Sa'ddy."

"Oh, dear. I wanted to go upstairs to National Petroleum."

"Nobody up there. Nobody in the whole building except a few fatheaded executives who don't know how to play." Vicki looked at him in amusement and pointedly. "Who, me? I ain't here because I want to."

She stood, hesitant, unwilling to leave. It might be another week, or anyway several days, before she would find another chance to return here.

"Have a piece of candy bar?" said the elevator operator. He was lonesome. "Maybe I can help you, miss. I been workin' in this building a long time, nearly twenty years. What an old-timer like me don't know about the tenants, well, it ain't worth knowin'."

Vicki grinned, then she said seriously, "I wouldn't be surprised if you can help me. Did you ever know a Mr. Harold Lane, H. A. Lane?"

“’Bout ten or twelve years ago? Sure. He was with National Petroleum, went to Europe to survey for ’em, went to China for ’em. Had a nice wife and a little girl, a pretty kid.”

“Why, that’s wonderful!” Vicki exclaimed. “What did the daughter look like?”

“Wait—now wait a sec—she had dark hair, brown like. Pink cheeks. Lively, very lively. But I don’t recall her name.”

“Never mind, this is wonderful! What a memory you have!”

He puffed up with pleasure. “It’s part o’ my work. Anyway, anybody’d remember Mr. Lane. He was an awfully nice man, friendly with everybody, never in such a hurry that he couldn’t stop to say hello. I remember when he came back from Europe ’bout three years ago! He brought souvenirs for everybody in the place. Even brought me a fan to give to my wife.”

Vicki was so excited she was pacing up and down the lobby. “And when he came back three years ago, was Jean—his daughter—with him?”

“Jean, that’s her name! Yeah, she came in one day with Mr. Lane. Quite a young lady by that time. Not grown up, I mean, but tall.”

Vicki could have hugged the skinny elevator man. He was putting her on the right track at last! To think she had been chasing around Chicago, St. Louis, and Memphis, when the casual fountain of information waited right here at home base!

"It's very important to me to find where the Lanes are at the present time," she said. "If you can help me, I'll make it worth your while."

"Naw, you don't have to pay me, miss. Glad to do it. I can see you're okay. Let me think a sec. Hah! You know what? There's some old files of National Petroleum's in the basement. I bet they're stuffed with *years* of information. I bet you Mr. Lane's address is somewhere in the files—only I can't touch them. Say! Maybe somebody's upstairs at that."

"Can we go up and see?" Vicki asked.

"Why not? I sure would like to help you, miss."

The elevator man, whose name was Sam Stanley, and Vicki rode up to the National Petroleum offices on the forty-ninth floor.

"Hello!" Sam bellowed into the empty offices. "Anybody here?"

A voice answered. "Thank goodness!" Vicki thought. They traced the voice to the accounting department. A man in shirt sleeves was working over balance sheets.

"Hello, Sam. Looking for me?"

"Mr. Conrad, this here young lady needs some information, and maybe you could tell her. Miss, this is National Petroleum's chief accountant. What Mr. Conrad don't know about their records, new *and* old, ain't worth knowin'."

"Just a minute, Sam." The accountant looked skeptically at Vicki. "No business firm gives out information just like that."

Vicki explained earnestly to Mr. Conrad what information she wanted, "for personal not business reasons." He did not soften.

"I don't know who you are, miss. I don't know to what use you might put this information about our employee. Don't you see, business information is confidential."

Vicki pleaded. She brought out her stewardess identification, which was a sort of character reference.

"It would mean breaking a rule, Miss Barr."

"But it's terribly important! It's a family matter—I'm bringing word from Jean Lane's sister!"

The accountant studied her. "Well, if it's important, I'll go down to the basement with you."

"I'm in luck," Vicki thought as they rode down to the basement.

Mr. Conrad was a patient and good-tempered man. The key stuck. The lights balked. But he got everything to working, and Sam Stanley dusted off an old packing case for Vicki to sit on.

"This may take time, miss," Sam said. "I got another candy bar. Want some?"

"Too excited," Vicki said. "Thanks just the same. What do you think we'll find?"

The accountant was thoroughly familiar with these old files. He promptly located Harold Lane's folder.

"Here, look at this, Miss Barr."

Vicki glanced through the folder, bearing in mind

that it held confidential information which she had no right to know or ever to mention. Interesting as the old folder was, it was too dated to be of much use now.

"Is this the latest there is down here on Harold Lane?" Vicki asked disappointedly.

"That's all," Mr. Conrad said. "Doesn't it help?"

"We'll, there's a home address in New Jersey that might lead to more recent news of the Lanes."

"That's right, they lived in New Jersey," Sam spoke up. "Had a house. Sold it to the same people as are livin' there now, I heard."

Vicki pricked up her ears at that. Here were more people who knew the Harold Lane family. She copied the New Jersey home address and put it in her purse.

Then she looked again through the folder for any indication of whether Mr. Lane was or was not still working for National Petroleum. The folder held nothing to indicate that. The accountant did not know. Undoubtedly, any separation forms, or records of Harold Lane's continuing employment, if any, would be upstairs in the personnel department's file. Though hadn't the personnel man stated that he had nothing recent on this Mr. Lane? The accountant had no access to personnel files, to verify that statement. Well, then, Vicki decided, the most recent news of Mr. Lane was this memorandum in the basement file which stated: "Mr. H. A.

Lane and family are expected to arrive in New York from Europe on or about June 3." The date was three summers ago. Yes, that tallied with the statements of the nurse, Martha Brown, and the banker, Mr. Dewitt, at Hightower.

Well, the New Jersey address was a step gained. Vicki felt immensely encouraged to receive first-hand news of the Lane family from a person who had known them for a long time.

"I don't know how to thank you," she said to the elevator man and Mr. Conrad. "Not many people would have gone to so much trouble."

"Not at all," said Mr. Conrad.

"Aw, it's slow on Sa'ddy, anyways."

The trip to the lovely New Jersey town was a pleasant chore, and netted Vicki bits and pieces of information.

To begin with, the house itself was spacious and inviting, and plenty of young people lived in the neighborhood. Little Jean must have enjoyed living here. Mr. and Mrs. Lane obviously were good parents to her.

The Pendletons, who had bought the house several years ago from the Lanes, remembered the family well. Vicki was received graciously by the mother of the family, who asked her in, assuming that she was a friend of the Lanes.

"I don't really know the Lanes, Mrs. Pendleton,"

said Vicki. Indeed, she wondered whether the Lanes themselves would welcome her once they learned the delicate nature of her errand.

"We never knew the Lanes intimately ourselves," Mrs. Pendleton replied, "although we were neighbors in this town. . . . No, we've had no contact with them since. They sold us this house and went abroad a second time. It's Jean you're particularly interested in? She was such a happy child, she was eight to ten years old, I'd say, during the time they occupied this house. She attended the school two blocks from here. Harold and Wilma Lane adored her. They built a special playroom for her upstairs. If you'd care to see it—"

How different from the austere fishing village where Mary had been brought up! Yet both were happy girls.

Mrs. Pendleton described Jean as best she could remember, and Vicki began to get a picture of the missing twin growing up.

"Jean was an adopted child, you know, Miss Barr. Mrs. Lane told me that when we were discussing my own children. Jean was a charming little blond girl—"

"Blond?" Vicki felt a sharp misgiving. Had the elevator man been mistaken?

"Perhaps I don't remember too well. I wouldn't vouch for Jean's coloring."

Vicki accepted that and turned to another question.

"Forgive me for asking, but I do need to know. Did the Lanes ever tell Jean they had adopted her?"

"I really don't know that, Miss Barr. Whether the child knew or not, they were a most devoted and happy family."

That piece of information alone justified the trip to New Jersey. It would put Mrs. Verga's mind at ease. Mary's, too. Vicki thanked Mrs. Pendleton and rose to leave.

"Please remember us to the Lanes when you see them, Miss Barr."

"I will."

That is, if she ever found them!

Well, where did her search stand now? The most recent news she had of the Harold Lane family was of their return from Europe to New York three summers ago. On the train ride back to New York, Vicki tried to picture what a man just returning from an overseas job would be doing in New York. He would consult with the New York office, he would make out reports of what he had been doing, and clean up unfinished business. Wouldn't he need a secretary to help him? Yes, he probably would. Who had been Harold Lane's secretary in New York three summers ago? For that person would know quite a few things about him and his family. Possibly one of the staff secretaries at National Petroleum had been the one.

Between that busy week end and midweek, when Vicki would again have a few free hours in New

York, the image of Jean Lane rose up in her imagination. The twin remained tantalizingly vague. How much did she look like Mary? How much did she resemble her sister in spirit and temperament? Did she have any inkling of a twin sister, who wished to find her?

The secretary was located without too much difficulty through the National Petroleum office in New York. Her name was Miss Isabel Peters. She was on sick leave, having broken a leg, but could be reached at her home. The address was not far from where the stewardesses had their apartment.

"So we're neighbors," Isabel Peters said. She sat in an easy chair, young and lively, with her leg in a plaster cast, propped up. Her sister had let Vicki in. "When you telephoned, Miss Barr, I thought at first you were Jean Lane. I was delighted. She's such a charming girl."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Vicki said. "And I'm really sorry to barge in on you when you're convalescing."

"Not at all. I'm fine, only the leg isn't. It's fun having a caller. So you want to know about the Harold Lanes? I had a dreamy job with him," young Miss Peters said. "He was nice as anything to work for, and sometimes, when Mrs. Lane and Jean came to the office, we'd all have lunch together. A regular party!"

"What was Jean like?" Vicki asked curiously.

"A lighthearted girl. Like me." Isabel Peters laughed. "She's going to be stunning when she's grown. Wish I could see what she looks like by now. Wonderfully vivid. Brunette coloring—"

Brunette. So the lady in New Jersey had been in error. A question popped into Vicki's head which had never occurred to her before.

"Did the Lanes have any other children?" That might make a big difference in how a twin sister would be welcomed.

"No, only Jean. It's funny about her name. Mr. Lane had wanted to name her Harriet or something that sounds like Harold, his own name. Not that he *likes* the name Harold much, he usually signed himself 'H. Allen Lane.' But he wanted her named after him. Mrs. Lane insisted on naming Jean after her best friend, though."

The young secretary rattled on about names in general until Vicki brought her back to the subject with a question.

"Where did they live in New York? Well, they'd just come back from a little vacation in High Beach or Hightower, Massachusetts, some name like that. They went there right after landing in the United States because Mrs. Lane wasn't feeling very well. Then they came back to New York and stayed at a hotel. They didn't have a house or apartment in New York. You see, they were just in New York a

few weeks, while Mr. Lane wound up his work."

"That was when you were his secretary, Miss Peters?"

"That's right. The only trouble with my job with Mr. Lane was that it didn't last long enough to suit me! We finished writing all his European reports, and some letters. It didn't take very long, a few weeks. Then the three of them went away."

"Where to?"

"Hm-m. Wish I could tell you. Mr. Lane resigned from National Petroleum, you know—"

"No, I wasn't certain."

"I have an idea what our friend Harold Allen Lane is doing, though." Isabel Peters started to jump up from her chair. She had forgotten about the plaster cast and would have tumbled over if Vicki had not caught her. "Oops! Jumbo, the elephant, that's me. Miss Barr, if you'll bring me the big wicker box on that table— It has my correspondence and stuff in it. I sort of have my own filing system."

The box held an astonishing hodgepodge of letters, old theater programs, single earrings, empty perfume vials, and snapshots. Isabel Peters dipped into the box and promptly produced a vivid picture post card. "Here it is," she said triumphantly.

She handed Vicki the card which was post-marked Calder City, Oklahoma, two summers ago. The picture showed a bare yellow field with skeleton steel towers. Mr. Lane had written: "They're

opening up a new field out here. New oil wells being discovered every day. Great excitement. Certainly keeps me busy testing soil. Kindest regards from Mrs. Lane, Jean, and myself."

Isabel Peters accepted the post card back from her visitor. "What do you make of that?"

"Doesn't it sound as if Mr. Lane is working as an independent geologist—free-lancing?"

"That's what I thought, too. He'd be traveling to wherever jobs are. Wherever it looks as if oil might be pumped up. On the other hand, I had a vague impression he wanted to retire." The young secretary shook her head. "No one in the office knows, because I asked. So now, Miss Barr, I've told you all."

"Do you suppose he might still be in Oklahoma?"

"Might be."

"Or at any rate I could trace him from there," Vicki mused.

"Great heavens, don't tell me you're casually going off to Oklahoma!"

"It's not far when you fly," Vicki said cheerfully. "Thank you very, very much, Miss Peters."

She had to find Jean Lane. She *had* to. The post card was her first definite lead.



CHAPTER X

Bill Gives a Party

"No!" SAID RUTH BENSON TO VICKI. "I WILL NOT RE-route you to the Oklahoma run. You begged and pleaded for the Memphis run, and now, by gum, you're going to stay on it."

Vicki looked ruefully at the miniature china dogs and cats on her boss's desk. "I could send you some Indian turquoise jewelry from Oklahoma. Or a nice barrel of oil."

"You can send me a post card from Memphis."

"Well, then, could I please have the third week of my vacation pretty quickly? Ah, please, Benny."

"Vicki, that soft voice would melt a stone statue's heart. Even if I said Yes on the vacation, how do you propose to get from Memphis to Oklahoma and then back on your job, within a week?"

In glowing terms Vicki described her flying friend, Bill Avery—and his Cub. "Bill would lend me the Cub, I know he would! I could zip up from

Memphis to Fairview, and then fly out to Oklahoma in no time."

"Well, just make sure you zip back to Federal Airlines a week from"—Miss Benson consulted her calendar—"the Monday following this week end."

"Oh, thank you! I'll send you an Indian chief."

Ruth Benson grinned. "You'd better not."

This was late Wednesday afternoon, at the New York airfield. Vicki had to work two more New York-Memphis runs before she could go off duty on Saturday in Memphis. In the meantime, she had better ask Bill Avery for the use of his small plane. The simplest way would be to telephone him long-distance. She still had half an hour before reporting to the passenger agent for today's flight, and she went into the Stewardesses' Lounge where she could telephone in privacy.

"Hello, Bill? . . . Vic. Surprised to hear from me?"

"Not surprised—glad. And cautious, mighty cautious. What're you cookin' up now?"

"You might at least ask 'How are you?'"

"C'mon, tell me the score. You aren't callin' up long-distance for nothin'. I'll bet you want another favor, don't you, pigeon?"

"Well—I—it's a matter of renting your—"

She could hear Bill chuckle. "Now just a minute, I'm goin' to announce somethin'. I think it's time *you did me* a favor."

"Glad to, Bill. What is it?"

Vicki held her breath. Bill was unpredictable. He was capable of asking her to fly to Labrador with him, or team up in stunt flying.

"I think you ought to show up for a big party I'm givin'. A breakfast flight."

"Is *that* all?" Vicki said in relief. "That's fun."

"I need a hostess, someone to feed and entertain the folks that fly in. And she's got to know somethin' about flyin', because we're havin' land-on-a-dime and contests and stuff. It's next Sunday mornin'. Eleven o'clock."

"I wouldn't miss it for anything!" Vicki exclaimed.

"Well, you better show up or I'll have my hands full." Vicki promised she would be there, complete with a large smile. "Now when did you want the Cub for?"

"Bill, you're a sweetheart! For the week right after your flight breakfast. Bill? Please invite Ginny, too?"

"Invite her? She and the rest of her Wing Scout pals are out here givin' the hangar a coat of paint right now, so it'll look good for Sunday."

Before Vicki knew it, she had completed her work stint. Each planeload of passengers was so interesting, so challenging, that her working hours went by as swiftly as minutes. Here she was, on a very hot Saturday afternoon, in Memphis. "Home of one wrong Mr. Lane," Vicki thought, turning in her flight report. Well, neither Memphis nor Federal

Airlines could detain her now. She caught a local plane belonging to some young Air Force veterans who operated a nonscheduled airline, and was at St. Louis airport before sundown. From there it was not far to Fairview. Vicki arrived home in time for supper.

How good it was to be home again! How satisfying to be seated around the table with her parents and Ginny, with their spaniel, Freckles, lying fondly at her feet.

"You look well, honey," her mother said.

Her father smiled at her. "We've missed you."

"I hope you don't mind me wearing your blue pinafore," Ginny said. "Did you miss us, too?"

"Did I! And all this—"

Through the open French windows of the dining room, Vicki drank in the familiar view of her mother's rock garden, the woods that rolled downhill, and beyond these, the lake. Even the trees and the sleepy birds seemed to welcome her back.

"I really shouldn't take time off when the Vergas are waiting for an answer—" Vicki started.

"You owe something to your family and other friends, too," Betty Barr reminded her. "Bill has his heart set on—"

"I know. I'll be there. Any news of the Vergas?"

Lewis Barr carefully refrained from answering. Vicki saw her mother and sister glance at each other. Betty Barr shook her curly head.

"I don't want to burden you, Vicki, but it will be an awful blow to that family if your search should not succeed."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" her father asked. "We can't fly for you but—information, funds."

"Not unless you can tell me about an oil geologist's business, Dad." Her professor father shrugged good-humoredly. "Tell me about the Vergas, and how you liked Fortune Island this year."

Fortune Island had been, as usual, a quiet picturesque place for Professor Barr to rest and read, for Mrs. Barr to enjoy water sports, and for Ginny to make still more young friends. Their visit this summer had been faintly troubled by the Vergas' tense frame of mind.

"Even Freckles sensed it," Ginny declared. "He'd trot over to their cottage every day and camp on their doorstep until Mary's cat chased him away."

Betty Barr laughed. "We've had our troubles with Freckles since we're home again. He won't play with the other dogs in the neighborhood. Travel seems to have made him vain."

The spaniel begged and whimpered to be taken along next morning, to anywhere, by anybody. But the family could not take him to church, and Vicki and Ginny knew that an airport was no place for a small, inquisitive dog. Consoling him with a Yo-yo swinging from a doorknob, Vicki and Ginny started out.

When they reached Avery Airport, only a few last-minute preparations for the flight breakfast remained to be done. Food was being supplied by the Log Cabin up the highway, and the Wing Scouts had already decorated the interior of the hangar and the office shack with bright paper streamers. Bill and his mechanic, Jack, had laid out extra landing strips, with white paint, to accommodate all the guest planes.

Bill was so excited he didn't bother to say hello. "Where's the guest book?" he shouted to Vicki. "Where's the camera and films?"

"They're in your desk," Ginny said stolidly, "where I put 'em yesterday. Center drawer. Also the newspaper is sending a reporter."

"Good for you, baby," said Vicki, as Bill darted off like a distracted rabbit. "What can I do?"

"Just look beautiful—and you do."

Vicki was dressed from head to foot in white sports clothes. With her ash-blond hair she was all gold and white. She just hoped her face would not turn lobster red under this broiling sun.

"You look pretty nice yourself," she said to Ginny.

Ginny was wearing, with considerable pride, the uniform of a Senior Wing Scout: a dark-green tailored dress with short sleeves, white collar, and white wrist-length gloves, and matching green trench cap. Wings, and a white carnation corsage which Bill had sent her, adorned her left pocket. Vicki looked at her younger sister with admiration.

It was a shame that the entire Wing troop could not come today, but Bill, in a rare burst of being sensible, had admitted he had better limit the number of guests.

"Listen!" Ginny said. They heard the faint hum of a plane. Then from the south came a dense sound of two or three planes flying together.

"They're coming!" Bill galloped out with his shirt-tails flapping. "Vic, is this shirt clean enough? Jack says I have to wear a tie!"

The roaring sound was closer. "You're fine," Vicki called to him. "You'll be a wreck within half an hour, anyway. Who's traffic man?"

Jack, who was normally calm, rushed out of the hangar waving two signal-light guns. "I am! The coffee's here—somebody see to it! Say, I like parties!"

Jack ran as fast as he could down to the center of the big field. The planes were glinting specks in the sky. Far off, unseen planes sang a many-voiced song. Bill's long legs flashed along the north-south runway, to signal at the far end of the field. Ginny ran to the man with the coffee. Vicki just stood still and laughed with joy.

To see a covey of man-made birds fly a rectangle over the field and swoop, one by one, down in swift landings—to see ranks of aircraft of all varieties being parked wing to wing, while their pilots and friends tumbled out, laughing and waving—was a gay, inspiring sight!

"Bill! Where's Bill Avery? Congratulations on your airport's birthday!"

"Hi! Here's Greenfield's pilots and their merry crew!"

"What a glorious day we have! Why, Vicki Barr, hello!"

Twenty, then twenty-five, then thirty airplanes crowded the long field. The guests in brilliant sports clothes milled around Bill's hangar. The cook's table and grill were set up there, and the cook in white apron and tall white cap served ham-and-egg breakfasts as fast as the hungry fliers came up. Vicki, pouring hot coffee, could hardly pour fast enough, and visit with these fellow pilots at the same time.

Bill brought over a quiet-looking young man whom he introduced to Vicki.

"Carl Bowen's been workin' around here, but he's flyin' home to Oklahoma tomorrow mornin'. I thought maybe you two could fly down there together. Carl knows those air lanes real well. He could show you the way."

"I'd be glad to," said the young man. "Where are you heading, Miss Barr?"

"She's goin' to Calder City, and call her Vicki," said Bill.

The visitor smiled. "Well, I'll be landing fifty miles after you do, Vicki, along the same route."

"That's fine." Vicki was really pleased. "I'll be glad to have your know-how, and your company, too."

They all breakfasted beside the airstrip in the sunlight, sitting in the grass. No one minded a little sand in the scrambled eggs. Not when Bill was "upstairs," flying somersaults for their entertainment. From the hangar came radio music, and Ginny offered a basket of doughnuts. Vicki looked around at the radiant faces, as she served seconds of coffee, and realized that friends had flown in from as far as two adjoining states. She did not know everyone there, but all fliers shared a very special and wonderful kind of friendship. A few young men were in Air Force uniform.

They played games with the wind, with their delicately tuned ships, with one another—sky games. Planes, one at a time, tried for spot landings. Not so easy! Vicki tried it in Bill's Cub and how she bounced! "You landed real close to the line," Bill encouraged her.

Then the planes lined up in a huge single file and flew a sky parade above Fairview. Vicki piloted the Cub. It wallowed rather dangerously in the slip stream of the big DC-4 right ahead of her. Ginny, seated behind her, shouted:

"I don't mind bailing out, but take care of the Cub! Or how'll you reach Oklahoma?"

"Okay, Amelia Earhart, I hear you!"

Back on the airfield, Bill and Jack staged contests for the more skillful and daring fliers. Crowds from town and farms gathered to watch. Vicki's only job in this thrilling circus was to draw names out of the

cook's hat, and keep the party lively. In the hangar, where the floor had been smoothed, some of the guests were dancing and some were planning return flights.

About four o'clock the planes lined up once more. This time, as they rose into the air, the pilots waved good-by and roared away home in all directions. Within twenty minutes all that remained of the breakfast flight were the paper streamers flapping in the warm breeze.

Bill, blissful and exhausted, lay flat on his back in the grass. "Pretty good, wasn't it?" he sighed.

"It was just wonderful!" Vicki felt ready to sit down and rest.

As for Ginny, she was fast asleep in the shade of the Cub's wing. When Vicki roused her, saying it was time to go home, Ginny yawned and remarked:

"Well, that's over. How soon do we take off for Oklahoma?"

"Not we, baby. I can't take you this time."

"Ah, shucks! I *never* get enough flying!"



CHAPTER XI

Oklahoma

A GLIMMER OF AN IDEA BUZZED AROUND IN VICKI'S mind. It had been vaguely occurring to her all morning, as she flew Bill's Cub toward the central southwest, following Carl Bowen's plane. Now as she approached the northern tip of the state of Oklahoma, as her flight map showed, the idea came clear and definite.

It was something she had learned in school, in history class, just a picturesque detail. But it might serve to forewarn her of what possibly lay ahead. The telling detail was this: Oklahoma was called the Sooner State. When the territory had been opened up on noon of a fixed day in April, 1889, those waiting on the border rushed in for free homesteads, only to find that the best lands were taken. A lot of people, evading the border guards and ignoring the government's official opening day, had slipped in sooner and grabbed the best for themselves. They were called "The Sooners."

"I'll bet there are plenty of modern-day Sooners in Oklahoma," Vicki said to herself. "Finding oil is a fast, competitive business."

The countryside itself was rugged. Flying over jagged, heavily wooded mountains took all of Vicki's attention and skill. And how high up she was! Carl Bowen must know what he was doing, but—! The altimeter reading alarmed her, until she remembered that Oklahoma, on an average, lay 1300 feet above sea level.

"Where the ground is zero or *at* sea level in New York"—Vicki figured to reassure herself—"the ground *starts* out here at 1300 feet. Now if I add to that, hm-m, map says about 4800 feet for these mountains—1300 plus 4800— Oh, well, call it 1500 plus 4500—makes about 6000 feet. No wonder I'm a mile up in the air!"

After that she did not let the altimeter startle her again. Carl tipped his plane's wings to say hello to her.

Vicki, flying west, relaxed enough to whistle as the mountains below leveled out in a vast plain. This lofty tableland formed part of the Great Plains. Vicki looked across the Cub's wing and gradually nosed the plane downward. Flying lower, as the plane ahead was doing, she could see more. The prairies were deeply carved by small streams, and shale and sandstone had eroded into strange canyons and mesas. The soil was a deep dark-red loam; it looked as if it had decomposed limestone in it.

Vicki knew what stone meant. Often oil was lying hidden underneath it.

A dry hot wind blew into the little cabin. She flew along easily above the perfectly level plain, and suddenly the flat land grew more interesting. A great river appeared, the Cimarron, one of the landmarks she was to follow—and she saw something glistening far off on the horizon.

“What the dickens is that?”

Next, she noticed big black lines, eight of them, running parallel toward the horizon. Pipe lines—huge pipes, carrying oil! The glistening in the sunshine took shape as the Cub approached. Vicki recognized oil tanks, immense silvery tanks, almost a city of them! Railroad tracks and fine highways converged from all directions. She must be coming into a more populated region, closer to Calder City now.

In twenty minutes more she was there, circling over Calder City’s airport, signaling good-by to Carl Bowen, and waiting for the signal which would give her permission to land.

She made a neat landing and stepped out of the Cub into intense heat. If Memphis in July was hot, Oklahoma at the beginning of August was a furnace. Of course, it was high noon—she’d made excellent time.

This local airport was a rough-and-ready place, as if it had been constructed only recently and was still unfinished. But the tall, lean, rawboned men

working in the pavilion were very friendly. They helped Vicki tie down the Cub, advised her that The Calder was the only hotel, and secured a ride into town for her in a service car.

The driver was a friendly boy. "Hot, ain't it? Hot enough for you?"

"I was comfortable while I was flying but now—whew!"

She saw fields burned by the sun to a deep reddish yellow, and heat haze shimmered in the air. The driver was studying her.

"You from the East, ma'am?"

"From Illinois." She supposed that would be east to an Oklahoman. "And from New York."

"I figgered you was a dude."

"Dude" sounded patronizing, but the boy cheerfully pointed out the sights to her as they entered the town.

"Can't blame me for havin' civic pride." They were riding along past attractive homes on tree-lined streets. "L'il old Calder used to be jest a little bitty cattle town, ten years ago, but look at 'er now! Oil done it."

"Finding oil here, you mean?"

"Sure. Looky straight ahead." Vicki looked. She saw three skyscrapers rising lonelily above the low, flat roofs of the town. "See our tall buildings? Oil business built 'em."

At the Square, Calder City boasted five public buildings and public gardens. The people looked

prosperous and good-natured. Her driver read a sign aloud for Vicki's benefit:

"'Calder City, Population 17,003, formerly capital of the Creek nation.' Indians, ma'am. I reckon a dude wouldn't know. We ain't New York," he said defensively, "but then New York ain't the whole U. S. Now I'll let you off in one minute—"

He turned the corner and a low, white palatial hotel came into view. Its rambling wings and glassed-in terraces must have covered two acres.

"You folks certainly do things on a big scale out here," Vicki said.

The boy looked mollified. "I s'pose New York is a pretty swell place, hey?"

Vicki grinned. "What you should really see is Fairview, Illinois. What do I owe you for the ride?"

"Nuthin', ma'am. I was ridin' in, anyhow. Say, do they have oil in New York?"

"There's *everything* in New York," Vicki said gravely. That was for calling her a dude. "Well, thanks very much for the ride and for showing me Calder City."

"So long, now. Here comes a bellboy for your suitcase."

Vicki followed the bellboy into a hotel lobby which was blessedly air-conditioned, and as handsome in its simple, serene modern style as any building she had ever seen. Great cacti and odd crimson flowers, in place of the usual potted palms, reminded her that she was west.

Behind the desk stood a very young man in sports clothes, eager as a puppy to be friendly. He was clearly a college sophomore on a summer job; the name plate read: *Jack Jackman*.

"Welcome to The Calder. The Calder hopes to make you comfortable and happy, here, and if there's any little thing you want, you just let us know!"

Vicki was a bit overwhelmed at such active friendliness, but apparently that's the way people were in the great wide-open spaces. In the early days—not so long ago—settlers were scarce and any newcomer was eagerly welcomed. Even Sooners.

"Well, thank you, Mr. Jackman. I *am* going to want a favor—some information. I'd better ask you for a room first, though."

Jack Jackman watched with unabashed interest while she signed the register.

"Miss Barr, eh? Well, Miss Barr, I have a lovely room for you, overlooking the oil fields. Let me call your attention to our swimming pool, sun deck, and terrace." The young man leaned across the desk confidentially. "Terrace is the best, that's where most of our guests go. Pool's too hot, except evenings."

"The terrace," Vicki repeated, as solemn as he.

Young Jackman stood erect again. "The Calder's three—excuse me, Miss Barr—*four* dining rooms—I'm new here—are open from—"

His eager voice followed her all the way to the

elevator. The desk clerk was very obliging. But if he was new here, or in Calder City only temporarily, he probably would not be a good person to ask about Harold Lane. Except for one question.

Vicki lost no time in unpacking the few garments she had brought, and in making herself presentable for luncheon. Her room was so huge that she did waste a few minutes exploring and marveling at it. The Oklahomans had so much land that they could spread out all over the place.

The dining room was a vast hall. Only a few persons were at the tables—a dozen businessmen in a group, two or three older ladies, and an elderly man who, when he came in, spoke to everyone. Passing Vicki's table, he said, "Hello, there!" to her, too. She was so surprised that she forgot to answer. Pleased, too.

"Who's that friendly old fellow?" she murmured to her waitress.

"That's 'Dad' Barnes. He lives here. Retired now. Awfully nice man. You're an Easterner, aren't you?" Vicki began to think she must look like a costumed actor. "Try our barbecued steak, miss. It's extra good today."

It was unique, and her waitress and Dad Barnes across the aisle took a lively interest in how the Easterner enjoyed it.

Jack Jackman at the desk looked crestfallen when Vicki said that probably only the manager, not he, could answer her question.

"I'm a first-class hotelman, ma'am. Mr. Keith, our manager here, says so himself."

"But Mr. Keith worked here two years, didn't he? My question goes back to two summers ago, you see."

Mr. Keith was a busy man in a crowded office. He received Vicki cordially and said he was at her service.

"I wonder if you could tell me, Mr. Keith, anything about an oil geologist named Harold Lane, and his wife and their daughter Jean."

"Oh, are you a friend of theirs? They stayed here two years ago, in the summer, for a couple of months. Mr. Lane was making seismograph tests here. I remember them well, fine people!"

Vicki felt encouraged. "I'm trying to get news of Jean, for one thing."

"Well, you're in luck. Some of her former friends will be here at the hotel this evening for a dinner party. I don't believe Miss Jean attended school here—school isn't open during July and August, when the Lanes were here. But she did make several friends. One teacher in particular, Miss Fox, was fond of the girl. I'll introduce you to Miss Fox this evening, if you like?"

"Thank you, Mr. Keith, I'd appreciate that. I was also wondering if you could tell me where the Lanes are now?"

"Now?" The manager's brow wrinkled. "People in the oil business move around so much that it's

hard to say. However, I'm sure we still have on file the forwarding address Mr. Lane gave us two years ago."

Mr. Keith called a secretary and explained what was wanted. She returned in a few minutes with the record, which the manager read to Vicki.

"The Lanes went to California. Forwarding address, the Golden Gate Hotel, San Francisco. Wait a moment, here's a Texas address, too. Commercial House, Brownsville."

"Why to California? Or to Texas? It's vague."

"On oil business, that's what I understood. I'll tell you what, Miss Barr. Why don't you talk to Mr. Barnes, Dad Barnes? He and Mr. Lane did some oil business together. He knows a lot more about Lane's business than I do—though I ought to tell you Dad is closemouthed."

"I'll try, anyway. Thank you ever so much, Mr. Keith."

Vicki looked around the lobby and huge, glassed-in terrace for Dad Barnes, but a bellboy said he had gone to his room for his usual nap. So Vicki took the next step. With young Jackman's help she got off a telegram of inquiry, and also an airmail registered letter, to Harold Lane at the California address, and at the Texas address.

"Mr. Jackman, do you think I'll have replies by tomorrow?"

"Sure thing, Miss Barr. You might even get 'em by tonight."

Vicki felt she had earned a siesta herself. She napped, showered, and put on her coolest dress. When she went down to the terrace at five o'clock, she felt refreshed, not like the girl who had piloted a plane from Illinois to Oklahoma that morning.

Dad Barnes, she was glad to see, was having a glass of lemonade on the terrace and—of all things—working with a large sketch pad, brushes, and a tray of water colors.

"Don't you stare at me, young lady." He chuckled. "Mother—Mrs. Barnes—used to paint for a hobby when she was alive and I got so blamed interested, I took it up, too. Sit down and have some lemonade. How d'you like my picture?"

Dad Barnes held up the sketch pad. He had painted in deep, strong colors the view from the terrace—intense blue sky, deep-red earth, dark-green trees. The picture was as vigorous as the lanky, leathery old man himself.

"I like it," said Vicki. As he poured lemonade for her from the pitcher on the table, she introduced herself. "My name's Vicki Barr."

"From Fairview, Illinois, and you're lookin' for the Lanes." Barnes winked at her. "Word gets around fast in a small town, don't it?"

She wished he would talk to her about the Lanes, but Dad Barnes was not one to be prompted in conversation. Nor, probably, in any other matter.

"Now what I like best to paint," he went on in his loud, hearty voice, "is oil fields and towers and der-

ricks, and all that. Ever seen 'em? That's a real thrillin' sight. Ain't you ever been out to oil country before? Why, you poor ign'rant child, don't you know Oklahoma? We've got oil and cattle and grain farms and lumber and zinc mines—oh, I don't know what all!"

Vicki sat back smiling, enjoying herself.

"But oil, that's the biggest thing we have, oil!" The old man tapped her hand. "It's a cryin' shame to be ign'rant of anything so important as oil. Oil makes your autos and planes and trains and ships go. Oil's vital for defense.

"Now, take me. I was born right here in Calder City when it was just a bend in the road, and brought up in oil camps all over the country. I've seen wells jump up in California, Texas, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. But home is the best."

If only he'd talk about the Lanes! Still, any information she could learn about Harold Lane's field of work would prove useful in her search. Vicki listened attentively.

"Oil's funny," he mused. "Like my father, I'm a free-lance driller—independent—for myself. Or I used to be. I've made some money and settled down here years ago. Not so young as I used to be, like to stay put. And I'm a darned good driller, if I say so myself! Still dabble in the stuff."

Vicki pricked up her ears. If he were in the same business as Harold Lane— But Dad Barnes' pierc-

ing blue eyes scarcely encouraged her to ask personal questions.

"How do you find oil, Mr. Barnes? Don't you use the services of a geologist?" Maybe that would bring the talk around to the Lanes.

"Geologist? Huh! Sure, a seismograph and all that machinery helps some. But the only sure way to find out is to drill a well. Costs 'bout ten thousand dollars to dig a hole. Maybe it's dry. That's wildcatting, and it's just luck."

"But when you *do* hit oil—"

"Oil's wonderful! When I hit oil, I hit what used to be ocean bottom and swamps, millions of years ago. The animals and plants living at the bottom of the sea rotted away. That's what makes the petroleum." He grinned at her. "We turn the earth inside out."

Very interesting, but wasn't he *ever* going to talk about the Lanes? Vicki made another effort.

"I thought a geologist—"

"Before I go any further, Miss Vicki, I'd better explain this. Before you can drill, you have to lease the land from the man who owns it." "Well, these leases are laid out in an orderly fashion, like a checkerboard. The law's behind the times in that respect. Because the oil ain't so orderly. It's spread out, deep within the earth, in a pool with vague boundaries. What those boundaries are, nobody can guess. And here's the catch! Now listen to this!

"One well can suck up the whole pool and leave nothing for the surrounding wells. It's a race to see who can drill first and fastest. Why, I could tell you—"

Barnes decided abruptly to tell her nothing.

"No use to gossip," he said. "Harold wouldn't like it and I wouldn't like it myself."

"By the way, where are the Lanes now, Mr. Barnes?"

"Headed for California, last I heard." But he said it in such a tight-lipped way, Vicki doubted he was telling what he knew.

"Wasn't there a chance they were going to Texas?"

His old eyes blazed. "I wouldn't know. What you so gol-darned curious about the Lanes for, anyhow?"

So it probably was Texas rather than California!

"Jean Lane is the one I'm trying to find," Vicki said. "It just seems logical to try to locate her through her father."

"Well, now, why didn't you say so in the first place?"

"Then you know where Jean is?" Vicki asked eagerly.

"Nope, sorry. Just let me tell you. Gossip's a troublemaker. I knew Harold Lane well, but I got no right to discuss his business. *He* wouldn't like it and I wouldn't like it, and Bob Lemont wouldn't like it, either. Why, I don't even go yappin' about my

own business, for that matter. Oil is a secretive business, and gossip can cause hard feelings. I've got to go on livin' in this town."

Vicki noted the name, Bob Lemont.

A bellboy came out on the terrace, calling, "Mr. Barnes! Telephone, sir. From the fields. Do you want to take it out here, sir?"

"No, I want to talk private. Thanky." He got up with surprising speed. "Excuse me, Miss Vicki. See you later. Take care o' my paints, will you, like a good girl?"

So he was not annoyed with her, in spite of his reluctance to tell much. There was obviously a story to tell. Vicki gathered up Dad Barnes' paints, brushes, and sketch pad, and took them to the desk. Jack Jackman was on duty.

"Hey, Miss Barr!" He leaned toward her happily in his gaily striped sports jacket. "I got news for you about the Lanes! A telegram just came in. Here you are."

"Thanks, Mr. Jackman. It's kind of you to take such an interest."

She opened the yellow envelope and read:

"Harold Lane and family never registered with us two summers ago, according to our records, nor at any date since then. Golden Gate Hotel, San Francisco, California."

"Did you find 'em?" young Jackman asked.

"No," Vicki said disappointedly.

"Maybe they went to Texas, instead."

After the hint Dad Barnes had let drop, they may indeed have gone to Texas. But why so secretive?

"I'll let you know as soon as the Texas hotel answers," Jack Jackman assured her. "I'll watch for your registered airmail letters, too. Always glad to oblige."

That evening the manager kept his word and after dinner brought over a young woman to Vicki, in the lobby.

"This is Miss Florence Fox, one of our teachers at the Kiowa School. This is Miss Barr, who would appreciate information about little Jean Lane."

The teacher was pleasant and young, and she obviously had been fond of Jean.

"Such an imaginative, friendly girl. She was fifteen when I met her here at the hotel and because she seemed lonesome I invited Jean to join our swimming team, and go on picnics with my high school class. She was popular, and she did seem to love being with young people of her own age."

So Jean had been lonesome . . . had lapped up being adopted by the local high school class. Yes, after living in hotels, after living abroad, after probably attending dozens of schools all over the world, it was likely Jean felt lonesome. Vicki wondered how Jean would feel when she discovered she had a twin sister!

Miss Fox and Vicki talked together a few minutes longer. There was not much more to say, especially

since Miss Fox had not heard from Jean and did not know where the Lanes were now.

"I was a little put out that Jean didn't write to us, to tell you the truth."

Vicki thought perhaps her father told her not to. Perhaps Harold Lane had wanted to disappear. But why?

"Well, if I locate Jean, I'll give her your best wishes, Miss Fox. Don't let me keep you from your dinner party."

Miss Fox said good-by to her. Vicki spent the balance of the evening alone. She did not see Dad Barnes anywhere around. At nine P.M. a telegram arrived saying the Lanes had never registered at the Brownsville, Texas, hotel.



CHAPTER XII

Dad Barnes

BRIGHT AND EARLY THE NEXT MORNING VICKI ASKED for her mail. There were two letters for her. The airmail registered letters she had sent to Harold Lane, at the Texas and California hotel addresses, were returned, stamped: *Not At This Address*.

"That's too bad," Jack Jackman sympathized. "What are you goin' to try next, Miss Barr?"

"I have an idea. Don't know how advisable it is, though. It might land me in trouble."

"Study it over a bit," young Jackman said. "Go have breakfast first."

In the dining room Dad Barnes was not at his table. She had not seen him at dinner last evening, either, she recalled. Had he been called away on business to the oil fields outside of town? Vicki lingered over breakfast. Her idea involved Dad Barnes, in a way, and might offend him. If he would come into the dining room, she could talk to him.

Why was he so secretive about the Lanes? In-

deed, why didn't anyone around here know where Harold Lane might be now? Vicki did not doubt Dad Barnes' word, nor the hotel manager's word on that. Yet people who have done recent business together, and liked each other, generally remained in touch.

Well, if Dad Barnes would not or could not talk, she would have to seek elsewhere for information with which to trace the Lane family. Dad Barnes had let drop the name of Bob Lemont. He was apparently someone who knew as much as Barnes. Yet to go over Dad Barnes' head to another person, in defiance of his expressed advice, would not be very tactful. She'd hate to make an enemy of the peppery old fellow. Another thing, she might be stepping blindly into a touchy, even dangerous situation.

"Hello there, young lady! Where's my paints?"

Vicki jumped, startled out of her thoughts. She was immensely relieved to see Mr. Barnes standing beside her table. He looked tired and dusty.

"Won't you have breakfast with me, Mr. Barnes? Your paints are waiting for you at the desk. I'd love to have company and another cup of coffee."

"Don't mind if I do." He drew out the chair and sat down facing Vicki across the roomy table. "Never did like to eat all by myself. Mother said it ain't civilized. 'Specially breakfast. I did have some coffee at daybreak, but I'm good and hungry now."

Breakfast arrived, and Dad Barnes talked as much as he ate.

"I've been out to the oil fields ever since Bob phoned me yesterday afternoon. Big excitement. A new well bein' brought in. Ever see that, Miss Vicki? Well, I tell you it's a spectacle! We worked over that baby until past midnight. Hey! Cora! I need more coffee, lots more."

"You must be tired," Vicki said, "if you worked most of the night."

"Oh, I slept some at the shacky little hotel they have out there for the men. But it's drivin' fifty miles each way in this heat that tires me out. Glad to be back where it's air-conditioned."

Dad Barnes settled back in his chair and lighted a cigar. He looked content. This was the psychological moment, Vicki figured.

"Mr. Barnes, is there any chance of my getting to meet Bob Lemont?"

He stared at her. "Why, sure, if you want to. But what for?"

"I *have* to find the Lanes. Maybe Bob Lemont could help me."

"Now what in thunder do you have to find the Lanes for? Maybe Harold'd just as soon be let alone."

"My errand has nothing to do with oil business," Vicki said hastily. "It's only about Jean Lane, as I think I told you."

"Well, what *about* little Jean?"

Vicki was stuck. This stubborn old man was not going to tell her a thing unless she gave him an ex-

cellent reason to do so. The truth was an excellent reason. Yet did she have the right to tell Barnes a family secret—and to tell it even before the Lanes themselves knew of it?

“Well? Well, Miss Vicki? What’s the trouble?”

“I’d have to tell you something confidential. And *you* haven’t been willing to tell me anything very much.”

His shrewd eyes twinkled. “Strikin’ a bargain with me, hey? Well, I’ll promise you this much. Anything you tell me, I won’t breathe to a soul.”

“And after you hear my story, will you help?”

“If I figger it’s in a good cause, why, sure.”

Vicki smoothed back her fair hair, wondering how to begin.

“Did you know, Mr. Barnes, that Jean is an adopted daughter?”

“No, sirree, I never knew that!” He leaned forward, clamping his teeth hard on his cigar. “You don’t aim to harm Jean, do you? ’Cause you mustn’t, she’s a nice girl.”

“I want to find her and tell her she has a twin sister.”

“Wha-a-at! Do Harold and Wilma Lane know this?”

“No, Mr. Barnes, I doubt that they do. Let me tell you the whole story.”

And Vicki recounted the saga of the *Gull*’s shipwreck, and how the mother and Mary had been saved together, and the father drowned, and Jenni-

fer, or Jean, vanished. Dad Barnes puffed furiously on his cigar while Vicki told of Mrs. Verga and Mary's great desire to find Jean, so that the twin sisters might meet at last.

When she had finished, Dad Barnes looked very sober. "Jean'll be glad to have a sister. She's had a lonesome time, travelin' all over, uprooted. A twin, you say! I don't know how Harold and Wilma will take this, though. It's goin' to be quite a shock to them, after all this time."

"I realize that, Mr. Barnes. I plan to be very, very careful about the way I break the news to them."

"Maybe you better tell them before Jean knows. I would," he said, and Vicki nodded. "Well, you look like a sensible girl. I bet you'll do the right thing."

"I'll try my best."

Vicki waited to see what Dad Barnes would say next. He sighed and sat there thinking.

"My, oh my, the tricks life plays on us poor mortals! That's quite a story you told me. Now I guess it's my turn to tell you a story, ain't it?"

"If it would help me to find the Lanes, I'd appreciate it very much."

"The only thing is, Bob Lemont and I ought to kind of tell it to you together. Might be fairer that way, and also I don't want you gettin' any wrong notions of why Harold Lane left no address here. He's a fine man. It wasn't his fault, and I don't want any harm done him."



Vicki recounted the saga of the shipwreck.

"Is Mr. Lemont still at the oil fields, or here in town?"

"Out at the fields." Dad Barnes rubbed his eyes. "Fifty miles each way, darn it. You prob'ly want to chase right out there, not keep those Verga folks waitin'. But I'm tuckered out. These old bones won't stand for another hundred-mile drive in hundred-degree heat. Leastways, not right away."

"I think you certainly should rest, Mr. Barnes, at least until lunchtime," Vicki said. "Then, if you feel rested, we could fly out to the fields. It's much cooler flying than driving, and we could cover the fifty miles in just a few minutes. Is there any place at the oil fields where we could land?"

"Fly? I never flew in my life!" Mr. Barnes exclaimed. "Besides, who'd fly us? The boys at the airport only handle cattle and grain; they got no passenger service."

"Oh, that's all right. I have a light plane." He looked puzzled, so Vicki added, "I flew here from Illinois."

"You—*you* flew here from—you and who else?"

"Me. I'm a licensed pilot," Vicki said.

Dad Barnes choked so hard he had to take a sip of water.

"Do you mean that *you*, sitting here as large as life and twice as real, flew a plane all by yourself?"

"Why, yes," Vicki said, slightly indignant. "Why not? I'm well trained and I have a CAA private pilot's license, and I'm allowed to carry passengers,

though not for pay." She grinned suddenly at him. "I'll take you for a grand ride out to the fields."

"What will the young'uns think up next? Well, my hat's off to you, Miss Vicki! When I saw you yesterday, I said to myself, 'There's a little bit o' fluff, helpless as a newborn yellow chick.'"

"I'm about as helpless as a—as a—"

"As a licensed pilot. I sure was wrong. Well, I always was a sport. You can bet your life I'll go flyin' with you! Boy, I can't wait to see Bob Lemont's face when he sees us come flyin' in together."

Dad Barnes, still shaking his head in surprise, went off for a nap.

Vicki decided to go for a walk through Calder City's business district. She stopped at a drugstore and telephoned the airport to arrange to have Bill's Cub gassed up. Then, though it was only eleven A.M., she returned to the hotel. She might as well keep cool. Perhaps she ought to write a letter to the Vergas—

"Miss Barr"—the hotel manager hurried across the lobby toward her—"we've been searching high and low for you. There's been an urgent telephone call for you."

"Long-distance?" Vicki had visions of Ginny swimming too far out in the lake, or the Vergas calling from the mainland, with an important new clue. Or—it would be just her luck—Ruth Benson, tracing her via Fairview, with an emergency order to report back to duty at once.

"No, it was a local call, Miss Barr. From right here in Calder City. The man wouldn't give his name, but he left this number and asked to have you call him right back. Urgent, he said."

"Thank you, Mr. Keith."

Vicki made the telephone call from her room. The number meant nothing to her. A man answered. His voice, a twangy Western voice, was extremely polite.

"Miss Barr, you don't know me, but I heard you're in town looking for the Harold Lanes. Maybe I can help you."

"That would be fine. What can you tell me?"

"Well, I couldn't tell you over the telephone. It's pretty confidential, you see. Why don't you meet me at my office in fifteen minutes?"

"All right. What's your name?"

The man at the other end of the wire laughed. "Tell you when you get here. It's on the northwest corner of Calder and Main, number 112. Room 34."

"You didn't give me your name," Vicki persisted.

"Miss Barr," the voice said gently, "I'll explain a lot of things when you get here."

"Are you a friend of Dad Barnes?" Vicki immediately regretted the question, for the man laughed again.

"Not exactly. Don't you believe all the tales that old skinflint tells, either. And if you must know, the name is Greenleaf. In fifteen minutes, Miss Barr? Is that convenient for you?"

She said Yes and hung up, wondering. An anonymous phone call was irregular enough. More troubling was the doubt this man had planted of Dad Barnes. Why, she had been listening to old Mr. Barnes without even questioning his good faith. He seemed like such a genial old man that she'd taken him at face value. But perhaps Dad Barnes was not as nice as he appeared.

And perhaps the man on the telephone was questionable, too. Before leaving the hotel, Vicki took the precaution of stopping at the desk and giving the address where she was going.

Jack Jackman's eyebrows shot up. "You going *there*? Watch your step, Miss Barr."

"Who is it?" Vicki asked.

"Ma'am, the first rule for a good hotelman is not to gossip! I don't mean—well, it's not so ticklish that you shouldn't go—it's just—well, that man hasn't any too good a reputation in this town."

"If you really wanted to be obliging, Mr. Jackman, you'd advise me about what I'm walking into."

Young Jackman looked uncomfortable. "I'm sorry, it's the rules, not me. Anyway, I'm new here, I don't know too much about him. Gee, I'm sorry. I'll try to make it up to you. I *will* help you yet, you'll see!"

Jack Jackman mooned at her so, across the desk, that Vicki smiled and said, "It's perfectly all right. If Dad Barnes looks for me, please tell him I'll be back at lunchtime."

The building at the northwest corner of Calder

and Main streets was one of the town's prized skyscrapers. Room 34 bore the name *Earl Greenleaf, Oil Investments* on the door. Vicki entered a waiting room where a secretary said Mr. Greenleaf would be right in.

He came bursting out of his private office about two minutes later. Greenleaf was a stout man in an expensive, rumpled suit. His red face seemed to be all smile as he ushered Vicki into an inside office, and fussed around getting her the best chair.

"Is it too glary in here for you?" he asked, adjusting the blinds. "I'm real sorry to ask a young lady to come out in this heat. I appreciate your coming over, Miss Barr."

"Not at all," she said, not flattered.

"Well, now!" Earl Greenleaf eased his roly-poly self into a chair. He reached for a cigarette, then put it back. "No, might bother you. Cigarette smoke bothers fastidious young ladies, don't it?" He beamed at her. "I understand you're a friend of Harold Lane and his family."

"It's Jean Lane I'm most interested in," Vicki said guardedly.

"Naturally, naturally, more of your age. She's a lovely girl, must be quite a young lady by now. Where are the Lanes living these days?" Greenleaf asked casually.

"I really couldn't say, Mr. Greenleaf."

"Ah, come on, Miss Barr. I'm an old acquaintance of Harold Lane's. It wasn't nice of him to run out on

his friends. Do me a good turn and give me their address."

Vicki did not believe Greenleaf was any particular friend of Harold Lane's, and she did not like this high-pressure coaxing.

"I'm afraid I don't know where the Lanes are. That's what I came to ask you."

The fat face registered disappointment, then quickly grew bland. "So you're looking for him, too. Well, that gives us something in common. But you wouldn't fool me, would you? It's urgent, real important, that I get in touch with Harold."

"Well, I'm sure," Vicki said carefully, "that if Mr. Lane wanted to get in touch with you, he would do so."

Greenleaf gave her such a suspicious look that Vicki wondered whether this fat, obsequious man had forced Lane's disappearance—or had even done Lane some injury.

"Maybe you're right, Miss Barr, you look like a real intelligent girl. I'll put it to you frankly." Greenleaf gave her a big smile. "Harold never appreciated me, exactly. In fact, he didn't treat me very nice. But I don't hold any hard feelings. I just want to be friends with him. Now won't you tell me where I can reach him, so I can tell him so?"

Vicki stood up. "I don't know where he is, Mr. Greenleaf. If this is all you have to say, I think—"

"Don't get mad! Sit down, sit down. Maybe I can tell you a thing or two you ought to know."

Vicki sat down again and waited. She did not like this fat, tricky man at all.

Greenleaf told her an involved, confused story which made no sense. Possibly he did not care whether it made sense. His insinuations against Lane and his open attacks on Dad Barnes were the real point.

"I think I've heard enough, Mr. Greenleaf." Vicki was thoroughly disgusted. She didn't have to remain and listen to his web of lies. "It's been interesting talking to you, and you must excuse me now."

"Wait—don't go—Miss Barr, come back! I'll tell you something—"

But Vicki, dashing out through the anteroom, was already hurrying down the stairs. What a waste of effort! Except that she had learned who Harold Lane's enemy was.

The sight of Dad Barnes' open, weathered face in the hotel lobby made Vicki feel better. After talking with Greenleaf she had a strong impulse to wash her hands, as if she had touched something dirty. She started for her room but Dad Barnes put down his newspaper and hailed her.

"Heard where you went. Darned little fool! I s'pose he pumped you full o' lies."

"Mr. Barnes, I went because he insisted it was urgent. And I know Greenleaf was lying to me."

"Just the same, he left you with a bad impression of Lane. And o' me, too, didn't he?" The old man was angry. "When I promised to fly out to the oil

fields with you, Miss Vicki, I meant it mostly for a favor to you—and a lark.”

“You’ll still go, won’t you?” Vicki asked anxiously.

“Yep, I’ll go. But I’m dead serious now. You’ve got to hear the full story, to counteract the lies Greenleaf handed out to you. Humph!”

“I’m sorry if I offended you by going, Mr. Barnes.”

“’Twasn’t your fault, I s’pose. How did you know? Let’s get some lunch and get goin’.”



CHAPTER XIII

Why Lane Went Away

FROM THE AIR THE OIL FIELDS WERE ALL MARKED UP by tracks that seemed to make no sense. Vehicles—of what nature Vicki could not guess—seemed to have run through miles of these flatlands, making straight lines and star patterns.

Vicki called over her shoulder to Dad Barnes:

“What are those holes that look like small bomb craters?”

“Geologists explorin’!” her passenger shouted back. “Lane went through here with a truckful of electronic equipment, huntin’ for oil. Moved a mile or two a day. Cost a thousand dollars a day to keep an outfit like his in the field.”

“Did you find oil?” Vicki called.

“Explosives and seismographs, they’re only indicators. The only sure way to find oil is to drill.”

That did not answer her question. *Had* Lane found oil? Would Greenleaf be so excited if he hadn’t? Dad Barnes shouted that the skeleton towers

blazing ahead in the sunshine was where they wanted to go. Vicki looked below for a place to land.

A large, bare field seemed all right. Vicki began to circle, losing altitude. Workmen, attracted by the plane, came running to watch. But they were standing around on the field, right in her path! Vicki sent the plane up again and tilted the wings back and forth to signal them: "Move back." On seeing the plane continue to circle, they did move back. Vicki put the plane into a long, slow, downward glide and coasted down to earth. The wheels touched and they taxied to a gradual stop.

As she turned off the ignition, Vicki realized that there had not been a word out of her passenger during the landing period. She turned around to see Dad Barnes mopping his face with a handkerchief but grinning broadly.

"Sure is excitin', ain't it?"

"Mr. Barnes, you *are* a sport!"

"Here comes Bob Lemont. Now watch this! How do I get this door open?"

Vicki locked the controls, unfastened the two-part Cub door, and they both got out. While she was staking and tying down the plane, she could hear Dad Barnes boasting to his cronies.

"Why, it's as easy as pie. Me for flyin' from now on! I want you to meet my pilot."

The men looked respectfully at the small blond girl in the pink cotton dress. One muttered, "I wouldn't risk my neck with her."

"Miss Vicki is a danged good pilot," Dad Barnes snapped. "Bob, step up and be introduced."

A rangy, sunburned young man in overalls and sun helmet held out his hand to Vicki, then thought better of it.

"I'm all greasy, ma'am, sorry. We mustn't keep you standing in the hot sun."

"Want to talk to you, Bob," Barnes said. "Private-like. Where can we go?"

There was no shade anywhere. Even the Cub cast scant shadow, with the sun high in the heavens.

"C'mon over to the new well," Bob Lemont said. "My drillers are over at the shack for lunch, so that's private. Excuse us, fellows."

They made their way through the knot of workmen and crossed the field to where the skeleton towers stood. High at the top of the towers, flames burned like transparent streamers in the sunlight. There was a strong odor of petroleum.

Barnes and Bob Lemont led her to a low, square, wooden platform built at the base of the new tower. A big hydraulic pump was rhythmically sloshing up and down, and some heavy tools and huge drill teeth lay around. Otherwise, this was a bare sort of place.

"Sit down," said Dad Barnes, patting the wooden platform. The three of them perched on the platform, Vicki in the middle. The air was intensely hot.

They talked for a few minutes about the new well. Bob Lemont told Vicki that they expected it

would bring in only eight to ten barrels of oil a day. "Just a small, steady producer." He explained that not everyone who owns or leases an oil well necessarily becomes a millionaire. Dad Barnes drummed his fingers impatiently.

"This young lady," the old man broke in, "is lookin' for Harold Lane and his family, and Greenleaf has been fillin' her full o' lies."

Lemont's face changed. He stared at the miles of land and sky, and grunted.

"I'm willin' to tell her if you are," said Dad Barnes. "She's got a right to know, I'm satisfied on that."

"Well, we aren't trying to hide anything, except to keep Greenleaf from pestering Lane. Go ahead and tell her if you want to."

"You correct me where I'm wrong, Bob. It starts with me, Miss Vicki. I'm a local man, so I've got a good notion o' the land around here. I'm a pretty shrewd amateur geologist, have a nose for oil. Well, sir—"

Thirty years ago a big oil company, the Consolidated Oil Company, searched for oil in the Calder City area and spent millions looking for it—in the wrong places. They found nothing and gave up. People called the effort Con's Folly. However, oil was later discovered several miles away.

Dad Barnes had an idea—based on studying local rock chips—that oil lay in the Calder City area, if not in the exact spot where Consolidated had drilled dry holes. To find it, he would need the help of a

geologist. He had known Harold Lane for several years, for Lane was prominent in oil work. Three summers ago he got in touch with Harold Lane, who had resigned from his job and was free-lancing. Lane came from New York to Calder City, with his wife and Jean, and he and Dad Barnes started to work.

Harold Lane did not bring a great deal of equipment with him; the machinery was too heavy and expensive to transport easily. Instead, he and Dad Barnes relied on their eyes, noses, and experience in testing small samples of soil.

"We didn't have to spend a fortune and lose half a kingdom to play a hunch," said Dad Barnes to Vicki.

They did find a sizable area which looked promising—this exact area, in fact. Still, the only way to make sure was to drill. They went to a local drilling contractor, young Bob Lemont, whom Barnes knew for years and trusted.

"Bob headed a two-penny outfit he called The Inland." The old man chuckled. "I asked Bob to drill a couple o' little holes for me, quiet-like. I put my money in it. Harold Lane advised and stood by. Well, sir, Bob started to drill—"

The first two holes were dry. With the third hole and Dad Barnes' bottom dollar, Bob found oil in one spot. "So, us local independent men succeeded where outsiders like Consolidated failed." Of course, that was just *one* spot, and the well was only a

small producer. The question remained whether the rest of the land in the Calder City area was worth the enormous expense of drilling. Barnes, Lane, and Lemont thought there was a good chance it was.

Word leaked out that oil was discovered outside of Calder City and the rush was on. The speed and competition were terrific. Big oil companies sent in their men fast.

Dad Barnes and Mr. Lane were not surprised. They had already, moving fast, bought up this land from local farmers and assembled a block of land leases. They could not afford to sink numerous wells themselves, so they promoted wells and sold their rights in the leases to the big companies. In return, the companies paid Barnes, Lane, and Lemont a small royalty.

The man whom Consolidated sent was Earl Greenleaf.

After snapping up the leases, the big oil companies' men made a few simple, inexpensive soil tests. They thought the land looked bad and did not want to go ahead with the drilling. Greenleaf was the loudest of all in his objections.

Lane and the two local men still thought the spot looked good. Young Lemont especially had confidence and was willing to drill. He had his rig right here in Calder City; the big oil companies would have had to ship their equipment. So, in exchange for Bob's work and expense, the big oil companies farmed out their spots to him. If Bob failed to find

oil, he would be left with ownership of the land leases for his trouble. If he did find oil, he and the companies would work out some way to share the oil. This was a usual sort of deal.

Bob Lemont drilled and found oil in large quantities. Everybody rejoiced. Lane and Dad Barnes' royalty on the written leases was enough to make them rich, and young Lemont thought he had made his fortune.

However, the agreement between Bob and the companies had been a verbal one, with terms tentatively set. Earl Greenleaf promptly hedged. Greenleaf tried to edge Bob out by bringing in more powerful, faster drills and sucking up the oil before anyone else could get it. Then Greenleaf openly tried to push Bob out by reneging on the verbal agreement. He was trying to cut Bob out altogether.

Harold Lane and Dad Barnes stood up for the young man. The quarrel grew fierce; Greenleaf threatened a law suit. The annoying part of it was, Greenleaf had some papers, deeds to oil lands, which for his own selfish purposes he wanted Harold Lane to sign. If Lane signed these papers, they would go against the interests of Bob and Dad. Lane would not consider signing them, he never had any intention of signing them. But Greenleaf gave Harold Lane no rest. There were weeks of long, unpleasant bickering. People, noticing the two men together, began to associate Lane's name with Greenleaf, and Lane did not like that, either.

Rather than bicker indefinitely with Greenleaf, Harold Lane simply stepped out of the picture. He sold out all his interests to Dad and Bob, left Calder City, owing nothing to anyone.

"Harold just wanted to settle down quietly with his wife and daughter," Dad Barnes said. "Makes me tired, an honorable man like Harold Lane bein' pestered by someone like Greenleaf. That Greenleaf! Why, d'you know, he's *still* tryin' to locate Harold? If he could, he would try to find a legal loophole to force Harold to sign those papers. That'd cheat Bob and favor Earl Greenleaf. Some kind o' hair-splittin' technicality which'd reopen the whole situation. Nice goin', hey? Oh, Harold could cope with Greenleaf, but why should he go through a lot o' unpleasantness? That's why Harold told folks he was goin' hither and yon, to throw Greenleaf off his trail, and then he must've gone some place entirely different."

"There's one thing I wish he knew," Bob Lemont said reflectively. "If you ever see Harold Lane, Miss Vicki, will you tell him this? A while after Harold left, the government oil man stepped in and made a ruling showing that Lane had done the right thing and that Greenleaf was a leech, not an active producer. Just a leech, trying to profit by all our hard work."

"And that ain't all! When Consolidated's office in New York found out what Greenleaf had been doin', they fired him. Yes, sirree!"

"Then why is Greenleaf still here?" Vicki asked.

"Because he ain't one to give up easy. He stayed on, on his own. He's bound and determined to get rich off these fields, and I guess Earl has made considerable money in Calder City as an independent, these past two years. We can't drive him away, exactly, not so long as he don't bother us."

"He'd be at my throat again," Bob said grimly, "if he could find Harold Lane. Government man or no government man, that technicality might well be upheld in a court. Particularly if Greenleaf hired a lawyer as clever and crooked as he is."

"Don't you really know where Harold Lane and his family went when they left Calder City?"

"No, Sis, we don't," the old man said, "and what's more, Bob and me don't want to know. Let Harold alone, he's well out o' this. Let him have a little peace o' mind. Like me, he ain't gettin' any younger. Let him alone."

"You see, Miss Vicki," said the young oil driller, "if we knew where Lane is, others in Calder City would find out, too. In a small place it's easy to go to the post office and sneak a look at other folks' mail. Or get a clerk to chat with you and give him a tall story about how you need Lane's address and pump him for information. Or just gossip. You see?"

The two men told Vicki a few more things. Once Bob Lemont had discovered oil, the big companies brought in their drillers and equipment. They were still here, developing the oil field, which turned out

to be a big one. As for Greenleaf, he continued to try to cut in wherever he could. Why was he so eager to contact Vicki? Because, when he had heard of her in connection with Harold Lane, Greenleaf figured he might trick Vicki into becoming his ally.

"You be careful, Miss Vicki. Don't you ever let that hound Greenleaf make use o' you."

"I won't, Mr. Barnes. I'll probably never see him again, once I leave Calder City. Well, I certainly do thank you, Mr. Lemont, and you, too, Mr. Barnes, for explaining to me why Harold Lane went away."

"'Twarn't nothin'. I'll give you a hint about Harold, if you promise to keep mum?" Vicki promised. "Bob and me think he's retired. Because after this mess with Greenleaf, he said he'd had enough o' the nerve-rackin' oil business. Livin' somewhere in Texas, prob'ly. That's what he always aimed to do, anyhow. But we're only guessin'."

With this meager information Vicki was obliged to be content. She flew Dad Barnes back to Calder City. They parted in the lobby of the hotel.

Vicki felt discouraged. She had come all this distance in order to learn only that Lane might be "living somewhere in Texas," and had been careful to conceal his whereabouts.

She had figured without Jack Jackman. The young hotel clerk came bounding around the desk, excited and beaming.

"I have good news for you, Miss Barr! I found out where your friend Harold Lane is!"

"Hush! I wouldn't broadcast that information if I were you, Mr. Jackman. Suppose you tell me privately."

They withdrew to a deserted corner of the terrace. Jack Jackman drew a deep breath.

"Miss Barr, I guess you can see I'm a college man. Go to a cow college around here. Well, I have lots of friends, classmates, and—you know how it is in summer vacation? Lots of us take jobs, 'specially if it gives us a chance to go traveling."

Vicki wished young Jackman would come to the point. But he relished his story too much to be hurried.

"One friend of mine, a real good friend, just happened to call me up long-distance this very afternoon. He wanted to borrow a few dollars from me, he'd lost his job. But maybe you aren't interested in the borrowing part. Listen to this, though! He called me up from Texas!"

"Texas is a big place," Vicki said dryly. "An awfully big place. Where in Texas is your friend?"

"He'd been hired and fired by a man named Harold Lane."

Vicki sat down hard in the nearest chair.

"I beg your pardon. Say that again."

"Joey was working for an old crank named Harold Lane," Jackman said triumphantly. "In a little town outside Houston, called Webster. Yes, sir, Webster, Texas. Your friend owns a place called the Paradise Motel and he lives there. Joey says he's a terror."

"A terror?" Vicki echoed blankly. Or maybe Joey was the terror. She took pencil and paper from her purse. "Paradise Motel, Webster, near Houston. Is that right? I'm so excited, I—I'm—"

"That's right. I told you I'd help you, didn't I, Miss Barr? I made good on it, didn't I?"

"I don't know how to thank you." Vicki shook his hand warmly.

That evening she made her farewells to Dad Barnes. On telling him that Jackman had located Harold Lane's address, the old man still did not want to learn it. "I'll tell Jackman to keep it mum. You tell Harold from me that Greenleaf is mighty unpopular around Calder City, someday folks are goin' to freeze him out. Then Harold and me and Bob'll have a get-together."

"I'll tell him, Mr. Barnes. That is, if I really do find him."

She thanked Mr. Keith and Jack Jackman again for their help, and left word to be called early. Vicki packed that evening, telephoned the airport, and wrote letters home. She wanted everything in readiness for a swift, early start in the morning.

"Webster, Texas, here I come!"



CHAPTER XIV

Paradise Motel

FROM THE AIRPORT IN HOUSTON, VICKI TOOK AN INTERCITY bus to Webster. Alighting at Webster, she looked doubtfully at the handful of houses and wistfully after the bus.

"Lookin' fer somebody?" A small boy appeared soundlessly from around a tree. The child seemed to be the only soul in the deserted, dusty, sleepy hamlet. "Where yuh goin'?"

"How do I get to Paradise Motel, sonny?"

"You goin' to see Harold Lane? Say, you don't want to see *him*."

"Why not?" The boy was so earnest that Vicki paid attention. "Why, Harold Lane is a very nice man."

"He is not. He's egg-egg—funny."

"Eccentric?"

"Uh-huh. He don't like nobody to come to see him, neither."

"Well, I'm going to see him, anyway. Which way is it, please?"

The little boy reluctantly, slowly, jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Don't you think a feller who lives all by hisself in a great big motel is egg-egg— funny?"

Vicki's mouth opened. If Lane lived alone, where were Mrs. Lane and Jean? She looked at the small, smudge-faced boy who stared unfalteringly back at her. Was he telling the truth? Or maybe the neighborhood children had built up a legend about Harold Lane, the same sort of nonsense as witches and haunted houses.

"Can anybody give me a ride over?"

"Naw. Less'n you want to ride my bike."

The bicycle was for a six-year-old. Vicki thanked him and walked. Fortunately her overnight case was lightweight. She had no idea how far away the motel was. Since the dust road stretched straight ahead as far as she could see, between fields of soybeans and cotton, there was no question about direction. She'd simply keep on the lookout for a motel among these occasional shacks and barns. A strange location for a motel . . .

As Vicki walked along she realized she did not know what Harold Lane looked like. No one had ever described him to her and she had never thought to ask.

The dirt road led into a state highway, with sparse

traffic. At once Vicki glimpsed a group of red roofs, and as she came closer, a big sign reading: PARADISE MOTEL. Through the trees loomed a rambling, landscaped central building, also red. Then she saw, parked in the driveway, two large identical roadsters, both red.

Vicki entered the driveway and paused in admiration. Except for somebody's persistent taste for red, it was a handsome place. A swimming pool, paved in aquamarine tiles, glittered in the sun, its water doubly blue. Luxurious beach chairs and chaise longues were ranged around the pool, but nobody was here. Vicki glanced ahead to the red cabins clustered under spreading green trees. No one was in sight there, either.

"I'll try the main building. Somebody must be in the coffee shop, or at least in the kitchen."

She crossed a low porch trellised with vines of red rambler roses, beautifully tended, and entered—not a mere coffee shop but—a lavish lounge with dining facilities. No one was in here, either. Everything was in perfect order, as if the place were not in use.

"Hello," Vicki said experimentally. She raised her voice. "Hello! Is anybody here?"

The golden clock ticking on the wall seemed to be her only answer. What was wrong at Paradise Motel? Had everyone been murdered, or had host and guests gone off fishing? Then Vicki noticed the sign hung on the open door: NO VACANCY.

Why, that was preposterous! No vacancy—when these big grounds were deserted and only two cars waited in the driveway!

“I’ll bet all these cabins are unoccupied,” Vicki thought, and went outdoors to look. As she circled the driveway, she noticed another and larger sign on a pole driven into the ground:

PRIVATE—KEEP OUT—*This Means You!*

HAROLD LANE, *Proprietor*

How could a motel be private? What sort of motel proprietor ordered people to keep out? Maybe that small boy back in Webster was right.

Just the same, Vicki had to see Harold Lane. She had come halfway across the United States to find him, and she had no intention of giving up now.

“Oh, Mr. La-a-anel!” she shouted at the top of her lungs. “Hello-o-o! Mr. La-a-anel!”

A hedge of red rosebushes rustled and from behind them emerged a very tall man holding pruning shears. He was an extraordinary sight. On his head he wore a fine Panama straw hat; he wore gold spectacles and a thin gold wrist watch. A creamy silk shirt fluttered open at his throat but with this he wore dirty white duck trousers, rolled up at the ankles, and was barefoot.

“What do you mean, trespassin’ on this property?” he bellowed at Vicki.

She gulped but stood her ground. “I’ve come to see Mr. Harold Lane. Will you kindly direct me to

him?" For she thought this weird creature might be the hired man.

"I'm Lane, and I don't want nobody comin' in here!"

"I—I'm here about Jean! I have messages for you from Dad Barnes and—"

"Never mind all that! Who sent you? How'd you find me?"

She thought of Jackman's long-winded account. "A college boy named Joey—"

"Joey!" the man yelped. "That confounded nuisance! If Joey sent you, then I sure want you to *git!*"

"I'm not asking for lodgings, Mr. Lane," Vicki said rapidly. "I saw your sign 'No Vacancy' and I quite understand—"

"You don't understand a thing! Didn't you see the sign that says 'Private—Keep Out'?"

Vicki bristled. "Very well, sir, I *don't* understand a thing! Why should a big motel on a main highway be marked 'Private'?"

"Because I'm sick and tired of havin' a lot of idiots around! No one really appreciates this place but me! When I built it, I thought— But I don't need nobody's money. Good old oil wells take care of me. Idiots! Enjoy the place myself," he muttered.

Vicki said very cautiously, "The roses are beautiful."

"Thought I told you to *git!*"

"Even the red cars match the place. Why two?"



*"What do you mean, trespassin' on this property?"
he bellowed.*

The man glared at her but could not forego boasting, "Because one broke down and I needed a car while it was bein' repaired. So I bought another. Inquisitive, ain't you?"

"And the pool is the loveliest I've ever seen."

He bridled but his belligerence was dying down. "Well, don't hint for a swim. I ain't invitin' you."

"I suppose you have a tennis court?" Vicki continued pleasantly, as if she did not hear him.

"Sure I have a tennis court! And a miniature golf links, and archery, and skeet shoot— Say, can you shoot?"

Vicki played coy. "Oh, I couldn't stay where I'm not welcome."

Harold Lane grumbled and growled. Vicki allowed him to talk her into inspecting the guns. They went into the main lodge. So it was only natural to have a glass of iced coffee and chat.

"Who's this Jean you keep talkin' about?" the man insisted.

"Jean Lane. Haven't you got a daughter? Haven't you a wife named Wilma?"

"Never been married in my life. Never intend to. Hate women. Now that I've retired from that rat race they call the oil game, I aim to enjoy myself."

Vicki watched him peer happily down the barrel of a rifle, and hoped it was not loaded. Was the man crazy? Had he forgotten the existence of a wife and daughter? Maybe she could recall a few facts to his memory.

"Mr. Lane, when you were in Calder City three summers ago—"

"Never been there in my life. Texas for me."

"Well, weren't you formerly with National Petroleum?"

"Who, me?" The man stared at Vicki as if she were crazy. He began to laugh, slapping his knees and whooping.

"What's so funny?"

"So you figured *I* was Harold Lane!"

"Aren't you?"

"I'm Harold Lane, all right. But you mean the other Harold Lane. Harold Allen Lane, the one that used to be with National Petroleum. That the one?"

So that explained it! Her barefoot host told Vicki that Harold Allen Lane and he had never met, but occasionally received each other's mail in a mix-up over similar names. By forwarding the letters, the two Harold Lanes had learned each other's addresses.

"Your pal, H. Allen Lane, lives just outside San Anton'. Want his street address? Then maybe you'll git off the premises?"

This time his eyes twinkled behind the gold spectacles. Vicki assured him with a smile that she wouldn't budge until he gave her the address.

"You can't imagine the trouble I've gone to, to get it, Mr. Lane."

"Aw, you females think any little thing like liftin' your finger is too much trouble."

Vicki smiled peaceably and tucked the address in her purse, memorizing it as she did so. H. Allen Lane, 14 River Pass Road, San Antonio, Texas. At last she had it!

"How you goin' to reach the airport?" Harold Lane shoved his Panama hat back and scratched his head. "Pretty hot to walk. How'd you like a ride all the way into Houston?"

"In that red car? I'd love it!"

"I ain't so bad, see? Anyhow, I like to startle the natives."

Both red cars were equipped with sirens instead of ordinary horns. Harold Lane regretted that he could not drive both at once. However, he drove Vicki along the highway at eighty miles an hour to the Houston airport.

"You sure been a pest," was his parting remark.

Vicki waved amicably and watched Lane in his red car tear off like a rocket.

"He isn't so bad, see?" she chuckled to herself, and went in search of the Cub.



CHAPTER XV

Truth Will Out

VICKI, FROM HER ROOM IN A MODERN SKYSCRAPER hotel in San Antonio, looked down on the river that flows through the heart of the city, between walls and flowering walks, and wondered.

She had arrived in San Antonio that morning, after spending the night in Houston because she did not want to do any night flying in this section of the country that was unfamiliar to her. In the meantime, she had been thinking most seriously. Her problem was still unanswered, although an hour when she could decently call on the Lanes was close at hand.

Vicki's problem was no longer whether these Lanes were the persons she sought; of that she was now reasonably sure. Her problem now was the difficult and painful matter of how to confront an unsuspecting family with news which might—if she were not extremely careful—uproot their family ties. How do you tell adopting parents that their

daughter's own mother is alive, after fifteen years? How do you tell a girl, who may not even know she was adopted, that a mother and twin sister are waiting for her? Without shocking them?

"I wish some really wise person were going to break the news, instead of me," Vicki thought. "A doctor or minister or mature family friend, someone like that."

But there was no one to undertake this perilously delicate task except herself.

At least she could prepare the Lanes a bit for her visit by telephoning and asking if they would receive her. Vicki did so, and a woman's pleasant voice seemed to encourage her. It was hard to explain briefly who she was. Vicki settled for saying:

"Dad Barnes in Calder City could tell you about me."

"Oh, yes, Dad Barnes!" the woman's voice said happily. "Mr. Lane and I will be so glad to hear of him. We'll be very happy to see you if you come from Mr. Barnes."

"I don't exactly come from him—I'll have to tell you—"

"Suppose we expect you at two, Miss Barr? . . . Until this afternoon, then."

The woman hung up before Vicki had a chance to ask whether Jean would be at home. Or whether Jean could be requested to wait for the visitor. That might have sounded awkward, though, and lead to

premature questions. Well, she'd have to trust to luck.

River Pass Road was several miles outside of the city, in a beautiful stretch of country. Vicki on the advice of the hotel clerk had rented a car. She drove along slowly, peering through greenery at the names along fence posts and driveways. Fine homes stood in veritable parks. She heard a waterfall somewhere. One of the most inviting places, a rambling house where flowers bloomed, was marked LANE.

Mr. and Mrs. Lane were sitting on the terrace, watching for her. Vicki liked them on sight as she came through their garden. Mr. Lane was a quiet-looking man, with iron-gray hair and an air of stability. His wife was a smiling, comfortable woman, beautifully but unpretentiously dressed. Both Mr. and Mrs. Lane received Vicki graciously.

"You're very good to travel out to see us, Miss Barr," said Mrs. Lane. "How is our good friend Barnes? And Bob Lemont?"

"And Greenleaf?" Mr. Lane inquired dryly. "Still there?"

Vicki gave them news and regards from Calder City, and listened to their replies. Yes, they were H. Allen and Wilma Lane, no doubt about it.

But was their adopted daughter actually Mary's missing twin? No evidence which Vicki had collected, not even the bluebell dress, proved definitely whether Jean and the lost Jennifer were the same

girl. If she could see Jean Lane—if she could recognize any resemblance to Mary—

“Is your daughter Jean at home today?” Vicki asked.

“We’re sorry,” said Mrs. Lane, “but she’s with some young friends on an overnight camping trip. She’ll be home tomorrow, though. Did you especially want to see her, Miss Barr?”

“Yes, I do, very much. With your permission. You see, the—the reason for my visit is really Jean.”

The Lanes waited, expectant. Mr. Lane was sizing her up with intelligent, guarded eyes. They both looked so kind, so off guard, that Vicki hated to tell them her news.

“Something about school?” Mr. Lane said.

“No—well, no.” This was going to be even harder than she had thought.

“It’s nothing bad, I’m sure,” Mrs. Lane said gently. “Do tell us what’s on your mind, my dear. We’re so proud of Jean—as parents usually are!—that we surely—”

“An accident?” asked Mr. Lane.

“Oh, no, Mr. Lane, nothing of that sort.” Vicki steeled herself to go on. “I—I don’t know how to tell you. Please forgive me, but there’s no easy way to—to break some news to you.”

Both Mr. and Mrs. Lane sat in tense silence. She must not keep them waiting like this. Vicki took a deep breath.

“Mr. and Mrs. Lane, an—ah—interesting thing

has happened. While I was helping to deliver warm clothing in Maine last winter, during that bad storm, you remember— Well, a child's dress turned up." The Lanes' eyes were fixed on her. Vicki's voice wavered. "A sort of bluebell embroidered dress that would fit a two-year-old girl."

"Well? That's not so extraordinary."

"But you see, sir, I found a second bluebell dress, identical, in—in someone else's possession."

She heard Mrs. Lane gasp. Mr. Lane asked quietly:

"What do you mean by a bluebell dress?"

Vicki described it exactly, minutely. She did not look at Wilma Lane; she could not, it was kinder not to. Mr. Lane's eyes watching her were steady.

"Now tell me, Miss Barr, where did this first dress—the one you delivered—come from?"

"It was contributed by a child's nurse, Mrs. Martha Brown, in Hightower, Massachusetts, who had saved it for twelve or thirteen years."

"And the second, identical dress? Does some woman have that?"

"Yes, Mr. Lane."

"Could the similarity between the two dresses be a coincidence? No, I guess not. I remember the dress. It was unique, handmade."

There was a second's silence.

"Does this woman say she is Jean's natural mother?"

Mrs. Lane started to cry softly.

"I'm sorry, terribly sorry," Vicki said. She had not wanted the truth to come out so abruptly. Mr. Lane's swift insight rendered useless the gradual, kind phrases she had in mind.

"It's not your fault, child. Go on." But Mr. Lane had turned a sickly pale color. He lighted a cigarette. "Please go on."

"Well, Mr. Lane, Mrs. Lane, I don't *know* whether this dress from Hightower really has any connection with your daughter, Jean. But a great many facts seem to show that it does—that originally the bluebell dress was hers."

"It was," Mrs. Lane whispered. "The Home gave it to us when we adopted Jean. They said she was wearing the bluebell dress when she was found. Oh! Why are there two dresses? What does it mean? To turn up *now*!"

Her husband took her hand. "It needn't mean anything dreadful. I'm not going to let anyone take Jean away from us, you know that. On the other hand, if Jean's other mother—" He sighed. "What proof is there that the woman *is* Jean's mother? How did you find her, Miss Barr? How did you connect her with us?"

"It came about by sheer accident, Mr. Lane."

As soon as Mrs. Lane had recovered somewhat from the initial shock, Vicki told them how, on discovering the two identical dresses, she had traced the Lanes to Martha Brown in Hightower, and thence through the Hightower banker to the Na-

tional Petroleum Company in New York. How, with the aid of a secretary and an elevator operator in New York, her search had led her far afield, but finally to Oklahoma. From there, after encountering many difficulties, she had at last located the H. Allen Lanes.

"Pretty ingenious of you," Mr. Lane remarked. "And why did you make this search?"

Vicki hesitated. This was the hardest thing of all to say. Mrs. Lane came to her rescue.

"Why, Jean's mother wants to see her daughter, isn't that it?" she said shakily. "I would, if I were that woman. It's perfectly natural."

Vicki looked at her gratefully. What a generous person! "Yes, Mrs. Lane, that's it."

Mr. Lane said to Vicki, "You didn't answer my question. How did you find this woman?"

"My family and I were vacationing in Maine last summer and we met a family named Verga—"

"What sort of people are they?" Mr. Lane interrupted. He was anxious for Jean's welfare. "What was the mother's name before she was Mrs. Verga?"

"Dorothea Bostwick. She's a good, kind, honorable person, Mr. Lane. Her husband and her other—"

Mr. Lane interrupted again before Vicki could mention Mary.

"Then Jean's name originally was Bostwick?"

"Yes. It was Jennifer Bostwick. Her father's name was Mark. He was drowned when Jean was two

years old. When the *Gull* went down, off Boston, Jean became separated from her mother and—”

“So that’s it! We never knew.” Mr. Lane rose and paced the terrace. “We searched for the mother, you know, Miss Barr. We made a complete search, we waited the legal period, we did everything—”

Mrs. Lane asked shyly, “What does Mrs. Verga look like? Is she dark, like our Jean?”

Vicki turned to Mrs. Lane with a smile. “No, Mrs. Verga is of medium coloring. The dark one is Jean’s twin sister, Mary.”

“A twin sister!” Slowly a smile lighted Mrs. Lane’s face. “Why, that’s wonderful! Dear, did you hear that? Jean has a twin sister.”

Mr. Lane said sharply, “Describe the twin, Miss Barr, will you?”

“Mary is seventeen, she’s tall, slender, long-legged, quick in her movements. She has very dark-brown hair and velvety-brown eyes and lots of pink in her cheeks. An imaginative sort of girl.”

“Yes, yes, that’s like Jean,” Mrs. Lane murmured. “I can’t believe it! A twin—”

“Just a minute.” Mr. Lane, restless, sat down again. “This isn’t proof, by any means. Now, I don’t mean we won’t do the right thing by Jean’s natural mother. And sister, too. But we can’t be expected to—” He broke off and covered his eyes with his hand.

“Would it help,” Vicki said gently, “if I tell you

how I traced Jean from the time of the shipwreck? Maybe your story and my story will tally.”

Vicki explained how the *Gull's* survivors were taken to various hospitals, with Mrs. Verga and Mary sent to one hospital, and Jean (or apparently Jennifer) sent to another. Vicki explained about the mother's long period of illness and amnesia, how her vague cries for a lost twin were misinterpreted as delirium, how hospital inquiries for Jean *were* made but came to nothing.

“That was because Jean was listed as an unknown, unclaimed child with nothing to identify her. Even the *Gull's* records did not list her, due to an error. Little Jean was transferred two months after the shipwreck to an obscure convalescent home, away out in the country.”

“Poor child. Our poor little Jean,” Mrs. Lane murmured.

“She was well taken care of, Mrs. Lane,” said Vicki. “You mustn't feel badly. Only—the convalescent home burned down. That was fourteen or fifteen years ago. Neither the local people nor the hospitals in that area any longer know anything about it. If there were any records, they're lost or scattered now.”

“And where was Jean taken,” Mrs. Lane asked, “when the convalescent home burned down?”

“I don't know that. I came to a dead end, Mrs. Lane. I had no way of finding out.”

Mr. Lane said, "I think we know that, Mother. We can reasonably presume that Jean was placed in the Sheltering Arms Home for Children in a suburb of Boston. Because it was through them that we found her."

"Well," said Vicki, "I've been unable to account for Jean between the ages of two and four. Between the time of the shipwreck and the time you first went to Hightower and engaged Martha Brown as her nurse."

"That was a lovely time." Mrs. Lane smiled reminiscently. "We had just adopted Jean and that brief vacation was our getting-acquainted time."

"I believe I can account for those two years," Mr. Lane said briskly. He told Vicki the following story:

Mr. and Mrs. Lane, searching for a child to adopt, had visited several orphanages. At the Sheltering Arms they were permitted to visit private foster homes where some of the children from Sheltering Arms were living. (It was felt to be better for a youngster to live with foster parents than in a big institution. These foster homes were temporary placements, and the foster parents were paid for taking care of the child.)

The Lanes visited a Mrs. Arnold, who had a pleasant house and two young sons of her own. There they found an adorable, happy little girl. This was Jean, and she was about three and a half years old, or perhaps closer to four. No one knew exactly. Mrs. Arnold and her two boys called her, simply,

"Lovey." Mr. and Mrs. Lane fell in love with her on sight.

The Lanes wanted to adopt her at once, but the law required a two-year waiting period between the time an orphan was unclaimed and the date of adoption. This period gave the child's natural parents a chance to find it.

Part of the two-year period had already elapsed, since Jean had been unclaimed twenty months; it was then August; the Lanes had to wait only until December.

With good grace, in spite of their eagerness, the Lanes waited. They had a search made for Jean's parents, or for any relatives who might claim her.

"I had an extremely thorough search made," said Mr. Lane. "I co-operated in every way with the orphanage authorities and the Missing Persons Bureau. I didn't want anyone to step in later and take Jean away from us. Believe me, we did our part."

"I'm sure you did, Mr. Lane," said Vicki. "It's no wonder you couldn't find Jean's mother. You see, during the two-year waiting period, she was in hospitals, very ill and with her memory blurred. Well, almost all of those two years. Toward the end of it, she went to Maine for a rest. Then she did try to search for Jean, with Mr. Verga's aid, in November and December, but in January she gave up."

"In December we adopted Jean. December fifteenth. Then my work took us abroad."

"Do you suppose our paths crossed?" Mrs. Lane wondered aloud. "They must have."

"If we ever see Mrs. Verga, we can compare notes."

"And see Jean's twin sister. Imagine! A twin! I think Jeanie will be overjoyed."

Vicki was happy to hear Mr. and Mrs. Lane talk like this. It meant that they were accepting the fact of Dorothea Verga, and of Mary, and were prepared to do whatever was the right thing.

"Maybe," said Mrs. Lane softly, "maybe the two sisters could go to school together somewhere. They've been separated so long."

"That's just how Mrs. Verga feels," Vicki said eagerly. "The main thing that worries her is that the twins have never known each other."

"They will," said Mr. Lane, and he was smiling now, too. "Unless—you don't think, Miss Barr, that the Vergas will make any demands that Jean live with them?"

"I doubt it. They're very understanding people. Good people. Besides, they're not exactly in wealthy circumstances—"

At some length Vicki described Benjamin Verga's work as a lobsterman, and their cottage on Fortune Island. She told them, too, how lovely Mary was.

"Perhaps we can do something for Mary," said Mr. Lane. "Not that we want to take the Vergas' daughter away from them, either. But the girls are about ready for college."

"Dear! We forgot! There's one thing—" Mrs. Lane's hand flew to her cheek in distress.

"I've been thinking of that." Mr. Lane turned to Vicki. "We've never told Jean we adopted her. Meant to, but—well."

They had explained away what little she recalled of her earliest years. They had fully intended to tell Jean how they had chosen her among dozens of youngsters, because they loved her so much. Yet it was a difficult thing to convey. "We thought we'd wait until she grew old enough to understand." But they had put it off. The Lanes, traveling all over the world, led an unsettled life, and they feared such an announcement might unsettle Jean still further. Besides, she was growing up to resemble her foster father. Mr. Lane found such happiness in this resemblance that he let the matter of explaining drift along. And so they had never told her.

"We didn't mean to deceive her, you understand," Mrs. Lane said. "Honestly, my husband and I have all but forgotten she's adopted. She's *our* daughter in every sense. We've been such a happy family—and now—"

"Now we'll have to tell her," Mr. Lane said firmly. "It won't be easy to break the news. There's no telling how she'll react." Again he touched his wife's hand comfortingly. "Don't worry, Mother. I think Jean loves us enough to—to take it."

Both the Lanes looked at Vicki a little sadly.

"You—you have no other children?" Vicki asked.

"No. Just Jean. It's all right, Miss Barr. This crisis isn't your fault."

"It's better for the truth to be known," Mrs. Lane said courageously. "It's always better to know. And I think having a twin sister is wonderful!"

The three of them were silent for a few minutes, thinking. Vicki began to feel very much in the way. She had upset these kind people quite enough. She ought to go and leave them in peace to cope with their sudden problems. Yet she wanted to be able to send some word to the Vergas, who had been waiting so long.

How hard this discovery had been on both families! But, with patience, with understanding, the fifteen-year-old secret might turn into great happiness, especially for the twins. So much depended on how Jean took the news of her real identity . . .

"I suppose you'll want a message to take back to Mrs. Verga," said Mr. Lane at last.

"Perhaps, dear," his wife said, "Vicki Barr should be the one to tell Jean she has a twin sister?"

"I don't know. I don't know just how to tell Jean, Miss Barr."

Vicki raised her eyes, eager to help if she could.

"Can you come back here tomorrow?" Mr. Lane asked. "Then we'll see how things work out."



CHAPTER XVI

The Missing Twin

WITH SOME MISGIVINGS, VICKI RETURNED TO THE house on River Pass Road the following afternoon. The rambling house, surrounded by flowers, appeared as peaceful as ever. But what had happened within its walls in the last few hours? How did Jean take the news that she was an adopted child? Vicki had known of two adopted children who faced such news in diametrically opposed ways. One, a girl, had accepted it cheerfully. The other, a boy, had been so upset that he ran away from home, though he came to his senses and returned.

"Here's hoping Jean doesn't do anything foolish," Vicki thought as she came through the Lanes' garden. She felt a sharp curiosity to see Mary's twin.

Mrs. Lane herself came to the door to admit Vicki. She had shadows around her eyes, as if she had not slept much last night, but she was smiling.

"Come in, Vicki," she said. "Jean will be down-

stairs in a moment. She's still feeling rather bewildered, as you can imagine."

Mr. Lane came in with a book from a side terrace and he, too, looked exhausted. Even his iron-gray hair seemed limp. However, he smiled. He laid his hand on Vicki's shoulder absently and asked if she had had lunch.

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Lane." For the life of her, she could not think of anything to say. This was no moment for small talk.

"Jean will be right down," Mrs. Lane repeated. The three of them sat down in the pleasant living room. Presently Vicki ventured a question.

"Did you tell Jean about her twin sister?"

"Indeed we did," said Mrs. Lane. "We think it helped her over the fact of adoption, eased things for her. She's awfully eager to meet you, Vicki, and hear about her twin firsthand."

"Here she comes!" Mr. Lane smiled in relief.

Vicki's mouth opened as Mary—no, Jean—came running down the stairs with her dark hair flying out behind her. This girl was so like Mary, the same tall grace, the same lovely dark eyes, that Vicki could not help but stare. All that was lacking to be Mary was the gray angora cat on her shoulder.

"You're Vicki Barr, aren't you?" Jean held out both hands in a warm welcome. "I'm Jean, Jean Lane. To think you knew more about me than any of us! Thank you for bringing such wonderful news."

She meant Mary, of course. She was a brave-spirited girl to put the stress on finding a sister rather than on the adoption angle. Vicki shook her hand and said how glad she was to find her at last.

"I almost feel," Vicki said, "as if I know you, Jean. I've had news of you when you were little, and then when you were growing up. And you—you—"

"Do I look so much like Mary? Is that why you're staring at me?"

Vicki laughed and apologized. "You're identical twins. You're so exactly alike it's astonishing. When you two girls stand side by side, there'll be no doubt in anyone's mind about your being twins."

"Yes, that will be satisfactory proof," Mr. Lane said quietly.

"Sit down, Jeanie. Relax."

Jean sat down beside Vicki but she was still nervous. She started to talk very fast.

"So much has happened since I came home late yesterday afternoon from the camping trip, my head is spinning! Imagine, being told you're really Jennifer Bostwick! Well, maybe I was Jennifer once, long ago. But I've been Jean Lane practically all my life, and I'm Jean Lane *now*."

Her father nodded, and her mother studied her hands.

"Vicki, I have the best Mother and Dad in the whole world. The fact that they adopted me—*chose* me—is only one more proof of their love, don't you think so?"

"Indeed I do."

"And you know what! Now I'll have two birthdays—the actual one, and December fifteenth which we always celebrated." Jean asked wistfully, "Vicki, when is Mary's birthday? Oh, never mind! It isn't even important. Tell me about Mary—about my twin sister."

"Well, Mary is longing to know you. She begged me to find you. You'll like her, Jean. She's a darling."

"Don't forget," Mr. Lane warned, "that you two girls have had very different sorts of childhoods. While you were traveling in the States and Spain and China, Mary stayed quietly at home. You may have to exercise patience in understanding each other, at first."

"What difference does all that make!" Jean scoffed. "I've been halfway lonesome all my life. I always wished for a brother or sister." Yet she did heed her father's point. She turned again to Vicki. "Where does Mary live in Maine? What's it like? What are the Vergas like?"

Vicki tried to bring into this Texas house the scent and sound and cool winds of Maine, and the peaceful isolation of Fortune Island. She told of Mary's rather sketchy schooling and of going lobster fishing in deep cold blue waters, and of the Vergas' modest cottage.

"And my other mother," Jean said self-consciously, "what is she like? Not that anyone could be lovelier than my own mother right here."

So Vicki described Dorothea Verga, too, her patience, her dignity, her half-abstracted air—"though that has practically disappeared since the missing dress turned up!" She told them about Benjamin Verga, whom she respected and liked so much.

Jean listened tensely. In spite of her generous speeches to her parents, in spite of her excited smiles, Jean was visibly under a strain. She circled back twice to the subject of "my other mother" but stopped, not wanting to wound feelings. Some instinct prevented Vicki from mentioning the shipwreck. Although Jean at two was too young to remember, it seemed a violent and terrible subject to revive. Jean must recall something of the orphanage, though, Vicki thought. Apparently she had been well treated there, for—allowing for today's shock—Jean looked like a happy person.

"You're not listening!" Jean teased her.

Vicki roused herself and heard Mr. Lane saying:

"I will admit Mother and I often wondered about your early history. All we had was the embroidered dress. Well, now we know."

"That reminds me!" said Mrs. Lane. "We haven't told you, Miss Barr. Or Vicki, if you prefer. Jean's father made a series of long-distance telephone calls last evening."

Jean laughed. "Dad was on the phone for hours! What *were* you talking about?"

Mr. Lane told them that he had talked to the peo-

ple in charge of the Sheltering Arms Home for Children. This was the home through which the Lanes had found and adopted Jean. Sheltering Arms still had the old records on file and were able to answer most of Mr. Lane's questions. The records did not indicate clearly or definitely where Jean had been, prior to Sheltering Arms. However, an elderly nurse who had been with Sheltering Arms for twenty years was able to remember. She said that, to the best of her belief, Jean, then aged about three, had been brought from a small convalescent home called Twin Maples. In the fire which demolished the convalescent home, all records had been destroyed—the children had been rescued, but no property or papers. These children were taken in by various orphanages. An aide from Twin Maples who brought Jean had not been able to tell Sheltering Arms much about the child's origin.

"But didn't my other mother search for me?" Jean asked, rather plaintively.

"She certainly did," Vicki assured her. "She tried hard to find you. But it took her almost two years to recover from the ill effects of the shipwreck, before she could start her search. By that time you were the Lanes' daughter."

Vicki added that Mrs. Verga had later on gone to the police and they had searched, too. But the Lanes were abroad, and remained abroad many years, apparently.

"Yes, we were out of the States for several years at

a time," Mr. Lane confirmed. "When we left Hightower for Europe, Jean was four. We didn't return until she was eight, I think."

"That's right, dear," Wilma Lane said. "That was when we had the house in New Jersey for two years."

"With the wonderful playroom," Jean remembered.

Then, Mr. Lane summarized, they went abroad again, remaining until Jean was fifteen. They returned to the United States, enjoyed a brief visit to Hightower, then came back to New York where Mr. Lane completed his work with a secretary. After that they went to Calder City, Oklahoma, where he worked for two months with Dad Barnes and Bob Lemont.

"By the way," Vicki said, "I have regards from them for you, and from Miss Fox of the Kiowa School for Jean."

"Foxy? You saw her?" Jean exclaimed. "You certainly followed our trail, Vicki."

"She even met Earl Greenleaf, I understand," Mr. Lane said dryly.

They stayed in Calder City until Greenleaf made Mr. Lane's situation intolerable, and he decided simply to step out of the picture.

"I was about ready to retire, anyhow. So we left Calder City and I took care that Greenleaf wouldn't continue to pester me. We came direct to San Antonio—"

"We love this city and I have a sister living nearby," Wilma Lane said.

"—and bought this house two years ago, and we've been living here ever since."

Vicki said she had been careful not to divulge Mr. Lane's address to anyone. Lane did not seem concerned.

"It's past. I'll get in touch with Barnes one of these days. I'd like to see him. In the meantime, we have Jean's future—Jean and Mary's very interesting future—to think about. How soon do you think we can meet the Vergas?"

Vicki's face lighted up. "The Vergas are waiting to meet you."

"Have you notified them yet that you've found Jean?"

"I wanted to have your permission first," Vicki replied, and Mr. Lane nodded. "It's hard to contact them quickly—no telephones, no telegraph service on Fortune Island, and the mails are slow."

Mr. Lane brushed that difficulty aside. Since he was not going to consider expense, he would request a telegraph service with a mainland station near Fortune Island to deliver a telegram by special messenger.

"The Vergas will hear from us by sundown today," he said. "I'll attend to it in a few minutes."

"We could fly up to Fortune Island, naturally," Vicki said, "because—oh, dear!"

"Why 'naturally' Vicki?" asked Jean. "And why 'Oh, dear'?"

Vicki said it was natural for a pilot like herself to think of flying. Jean and Mrs. Lane were surprised to hear that Vicki was a flier, but Mr. Lane was not.

"Anyone as enterprising as this young lady," he said with a slight smile, "is quite capable of managing her own plane."

As for the "Oh, dear," that was because Vicki suddenly remembered her week of free time would soon be over. Today was Friday, and Ruth Benson had instructed Vicki to be back on her stewardess job Monday, without fail.

"If we could fly up to Fortune Island early tomorrow," Vicki said, "and spend all day Sunday with the Vergas— Of course, I shouldn't say when to go. That's your decision. But I'd love to be present to see Jean and Mary together!"

"Tomorrow and Sunday, it is," Mr. Lane said promptly. "How many will your plane carry?"

Vicki felt her face grow red at the implied compliment to her skill. "Only two, Mr. Lane. Also, it isn't my plane, just lent to me."

"Then we'll have to charter a plane," Mr. Lane said. "Vicki, I'd appreciate it if you'd call the San Antonio airport and make arrangements. Do you want to pilot it?" His shrewd eyes twinkled.

"I'd love that! But I won't have free time to fly you home again."

"Then engage a commercial pilot, Vicki. Never mind the expense at an important time like this."

It gave Vicki a great deal of pleasure to talk to the San Antonio airport and charter a five-place ship and a pilot for early the next morning, in Mr. Lane's name. Her only regret was that she didn't know any particular pilot at that field. But she certainly was going to boast a little to Bill Avery, who flew charter trips himself.

"Oh! Bill's Cub! Here it sits in San Antonio, and I'm going up to Maine! Then to New York and work—how will I ever get the Cub back to Illinois? Bill is too busy at his airport to come and get it. And he's going to need it."

Vicki puzzled over that problem as the Lanes insisted that she must stay overnight as their guest. A man who worked for Mr. Lane would bring her overnight bag from the hotel and settle her bill. Vicki thanked them so absently that Jean said:

"Don't you want to stay?"

"Of course I do. I don't mean to sound anything but awfully pleased. But I'm stuck with an extra airplane!"

It was not until they were having dinner and Mrs. Lane was talking about a trip they once made to Charleston that the answer popped into Vicki's mind.

"Charleston—that's where Dean Fletcher's family lives—that's where I visited one Thanksgiving, and met his brother Bud. Bud flies. In fact, Bud

often flies Dean's own Cub, the *Marietta*, up north for Dean to pick up. I wonder if Bud would do a flying job for me?"

Luckily that, too, was arranged by long-distance telephone. Bud Fletcher was surprised but willing. Mr. Lane insisted on taking care of Bud's expenses. Bud would take a passenger plane from Charleston to San Antonio.

"It's not every day that Jeanie finds a sister," he said. "If that plane helped you bring the twins together, it deserves a little consideration."

By evening they were still marveling at how strangely Jean's life had been deflected. But by now they were laughing over the subject of adoption.

"You didn't know me," Jean teased, "didn't know where I came from, or if I was a brat, or anything. I guess all you knew was that I was healthy and looked like you, Dad. And still you and Mother took a chance on me!"

"You didn't turn out so badly. There were times when my hair stood on end, though," her father teased.

"The Vergas must have our message by this time," Mrs. Lane said thoughtfully. "How do you suppose tomorrow will go?"

Yes, how? Vicki wondered. How would the two families confront each other on Fortune Island?



CHAPTER XVII

Happy Reunion

THE FLIGHT ALL THE WAY FROM TEXAS TO MAINE gave a wonderful bird's-eye view of the rich and various terrains of many states. If the plane's cabin had not been so full of excited talk, Vicki would have given her full attention to the scenery below. But the Lanes engaged her with questions, with speculations; they were tense and happy all at once. The pilot, too, did not encourage Vicki to talk to him about the flight; he was an impersonal man, and busy.

They landed once at Chattanooga to refuel; at Washington, D. C., briefly for lunch; and that afternoon refueled again at Boston. The actual flying time took a little more than six hours, for the private plane could fly the most direct route. By four fifteen the Beechcraft was flying above the jagged Maine seacoast. By four thirty Vicki was pointing out Fortune Island to the pilot, and directing him to Greeley's pasture.

"Do you think anyone will be there to meet us?" Jean asked.

The girl was so excited that she darted from one side of the cabin to the other, peering out the various windows for a glimpse below.

"Dad, do you suppose Mary has your telegram by now?"

"No telling. Is there any other place to land, Vicki, where they might be looking for us?"

"No place else except the beach, Mr. Lane. I came in at Greeley's pasture myself last winter—when I brought Jean's bluebell dress, without knowing it—There's the barn!" Vicki called to the pilot.

As the plane circled low for a landing, Vicki saw two figures at the edge of the field. Two women were waving at them. The plane swooped down and roared past them, and in a split second Vicki glimpsed Mary and Mrs. Verga.

"They're here!" Vicki exclaimed.

"I knew they'd be waiting for us!" Jean said joyously.

Mrs. Lane beamed at her daughter but her hands were tightly clasped. Mr. Lane smiled in a sober sort of way.

The plane landed bumpily on the uneven ground and rolled to a stop. Before the ignition was off, Jean was fumbling at the door. The pilot grinned and let her out.

"There she is!" Jean cried. "Mary!"

She leaped out of the plane and ran, dark hair

streaming. From across the pasture another tall, long-limbed girl came running to meet her. They met in the middle of the field and seized each other's hands, laughing. The two girls looked so exactly alike, stood so exactly shoulder to shoulder, that Vicki stared. She heard Mr. Lane mutter:

"No question about it. They're twins, all right!"

"It's extraordinary," Mrs. Lane breathed. She, too, clambered out of the plane.

Vicki, like Mr. Lane and the pilot, hung back. She had no wish to intrude on the first moments of reunion. But she could not help hearing Mary and Jean, for they laughed and exclaimed at the tops of their voices.

"We've been watching and listening for your plane all day!"

"Why, Mary, I didn't even know about you until yesterday!"

"I've only known about *you* since last December!"

"To think I have a sister! A twin, at that!"

"Oh, I'm so glad, so glad!"

The two girls linked arms, smiling, and seeing no one but each other on this sunniest of days. Vicki noticed the two mothers rather hesitantly approach each other.

Dorothea Verga held out her hand. Wilma Lane came forward and took it. The two mothers spoke, but Vicki could not hear what they said. Mrs. Verga wiped her eyes. Then she held out her arms wonderingly to Jean. Mother and daughter gazed at

each other, smiling, half-bewildered, and then embraced. Mary impulsively went over to Wilma Lane and hugged her.

Jean shouted. "We have two mothers apiece! It's wonderful!"

"Come over!" Mary called. "What are you all waiting for?"

Benjamin Verga, who had been watching from the barn, came forward. Mr. Lane, too, walked over to the excited little group.

"Vicki!" the twins called. "Vicki, we want you here with us!"

The pilot grinned at Vicki. "I never in my life saw anything to beat this. You'd better join them."

Mrs. Verga was saying over and over, "I'd know Jean anywhere. Anywhere. We *did* find her."

"After fifteen years," Mrs. Lane marveled. "I'm so happy for you."

"I'm happy for all of us," Dorothea Verga said, pressing the other woman's hand.

Mr. Lane and Benjamin Verga shook hands. The two men seemed rather embarrassed, and left the talking to the mothers and daughters.

"It seems like a miracle," Mary sighed.

"Your mother never gave up hope," Benjamin Verga told both girls, and Mr. Lane said:

"It's less a miracle than a stroke of good fortune intelligently followed up by Vicki Barr."

Vicki said, "Thank you," and added, "I always was partial to twins!"

"Seriously, we are very much in your debt, Vicki."

"No one could have a better reward than seeing Mary and Jean together," Vicki declared. "Just look at them!"

Although Jean was deeply touched to see her mother, and although Dorothea Verga moved in a daze of happiness, it was the sight of the twins together which made everyone rejoice. The two lovely young girls would not leave each other's side—except to draw Vicki between them.

"We ought to adopt you as a sister, too!" Jean said.

"I'm not a twin," Vicki pointed out.

"You're practically a member of our family," Mary said warmly. "Our two families. I mean, our one big family—I mean our joint family—"

They burst out laughing from sheer high spirits.

A little crowd of curious onlookers had started to collect at the edge of the pasture, and several small boys were running around the plane.

"The neighbors are interested, you can't blame them," Benjamin Verga said. "Maybe we'd better move on to the cottage."

It seemed strange and wonderful to Vicki to see Jean and her parents actually in the Vergas' small sitting room. A few months ago Jean had been merely the vague subject of conversation, and scant hope. The Lanes had been unheard of. Yet here they were, the two families comfortably at home together, with Mary passing the canister of special

cookies to Mr. Lane, and Jean stroking the gray cat, and Benjamin Verga unlocking the once-secret chest. When the two mothers, tears on their cheeks, took out the two embroidered dresses, Vicki realized her search had come to an end.

"I'm very thankful," Mrs. Verga said again and again. She smiled at Vicki with all her heart.

Finally Mr. Lane said he felt they were all growing tired from so much excitement, and urged time out to rest. The Vergas had reserved rooms for the Lanes at Aunt Lydia's Inn, where Gabriel on the weather vane now, Vicki thought, blew his trumpet into the wind to celebrate Jean's rescue from the sea.

The two families made plans to meet the next morning and spend a happy Sunday together. Mary and Jean, however, were unwilling to part even for that long.

"Let's go to the beach this evening," Mary said to Jean and Vicki both. "There's something I want you to see."

The three girls had supper together at the inn, since both sets of parents excused themselves to rest. Vicki had not been in the dining room since she was there with her family, earlier in the summer. She wished her own parents could witness this happy reunion, and Ginny would have enjoyed the moonlight walk to the beach.

Mary led her twin and Vicki along the beach almost half a mile. Now, late in August, Mary said, was the time the fifty- or sixty-foot waves pounded

in. As the three girls reached the tip of Fortune Island they had to shout, for the waves were walls of water, breaking on the beach with tremendous crashes.

"Walk up here—high—on the rocks," Mary called. "Be careful! People have been swept away."

They picked their way on the great jagged moonlit rocks and stood watching the high surges of the sea break and lash and leap up. To Vicki, sea and rocks seemed as eternal as the stars. The roaring sea was terrifying.

"That's what we survived!" Mary shouted.

"It is a miracle!" Jean shouted back.

They were exultant, and Vicki was as happy as both of them.

Sunday, apparently, was the day for which they had all saved up all their happiness. The Vergas arranged a picnic. In Benjamin Verga's lobster boat, the two families and Vicki reached a fine private beach. Dark-green pines stood against blue sky and sparkling blue ocean, bounded by granite.

"'A stern and rock-bound coast,'" Mr. Lane quoted. He drew in deep breaths of cool pine scent and salty breeze.

"Here's creeping juniper and bayberry," Mary was showing Jean. "Over on the mossy, shady bank—that white is lady's-slipper."

"When you come to Texas, I'll show you cactus and bougainvillaea, and beautiful copperheads," Jean promised.

The elders talked about the facts of Jean's strange history, but as Mrs. Verga said, "It's past. It no longer matters. Let's live in the present, all of us."

They feasted on lobster and Maine sweet corn and blueberry pie. The three girls went sailing in the sun, and Mary jokingly quoted her Landlubber's Dictionary for Jean and Vicki. When they returned, their parents put some happy questions to them. How would the twins like to attend a private school together, and later college? How would Mary and Jean like to spend their Christmas and Easter holidays in Texas with the Lanes, and their summer holidays in Maine with the Vergas?

"Oh, yes, yes!" Mary and Jean agreed. Jean said, "Think of all the lost time Mary and I have to make up."

So peaceful, so happy was the party on the beach that Vicki could have stayed on forever. The gulls wheeling and crying overhead traced long arcs in the air. Vicki, watching them, suddenly thought of flying in another sense.

"I'm due back on my job in New York, first thing tomorrow morning!" She jumped to her feet. "Oh, Mr. Verga, will you please sail me back to the village?"

He smiled and nodded, his eyes bright blue in their network of wrinkles. Mr. Lane offered the use of the chartered plane. But the two mothers and Jean and Mary did not immediately let her go.

"We want you to remember one thing, Vicki

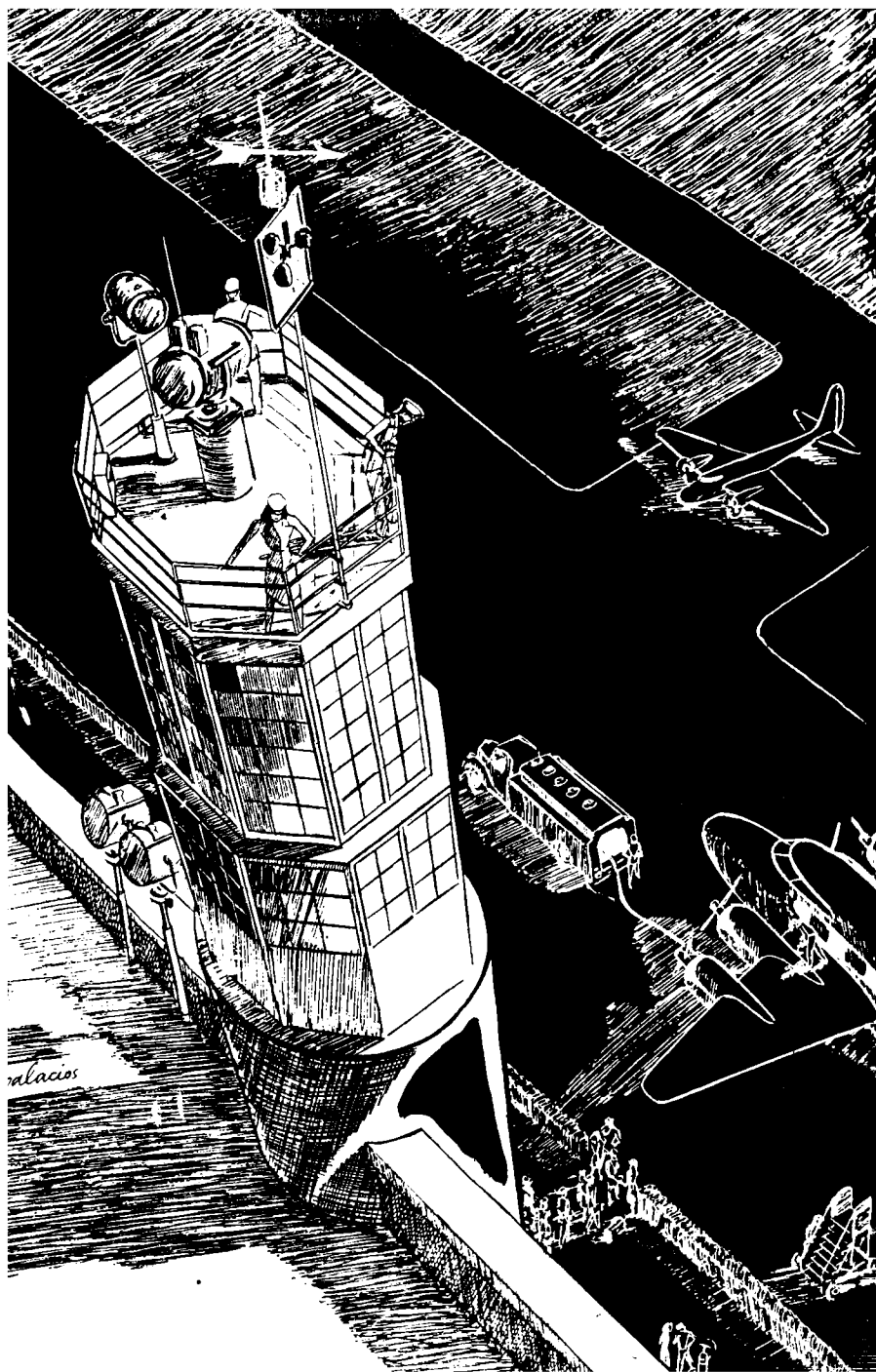
Barr," said Mrs. Verga. "It was by your help that we're all together."

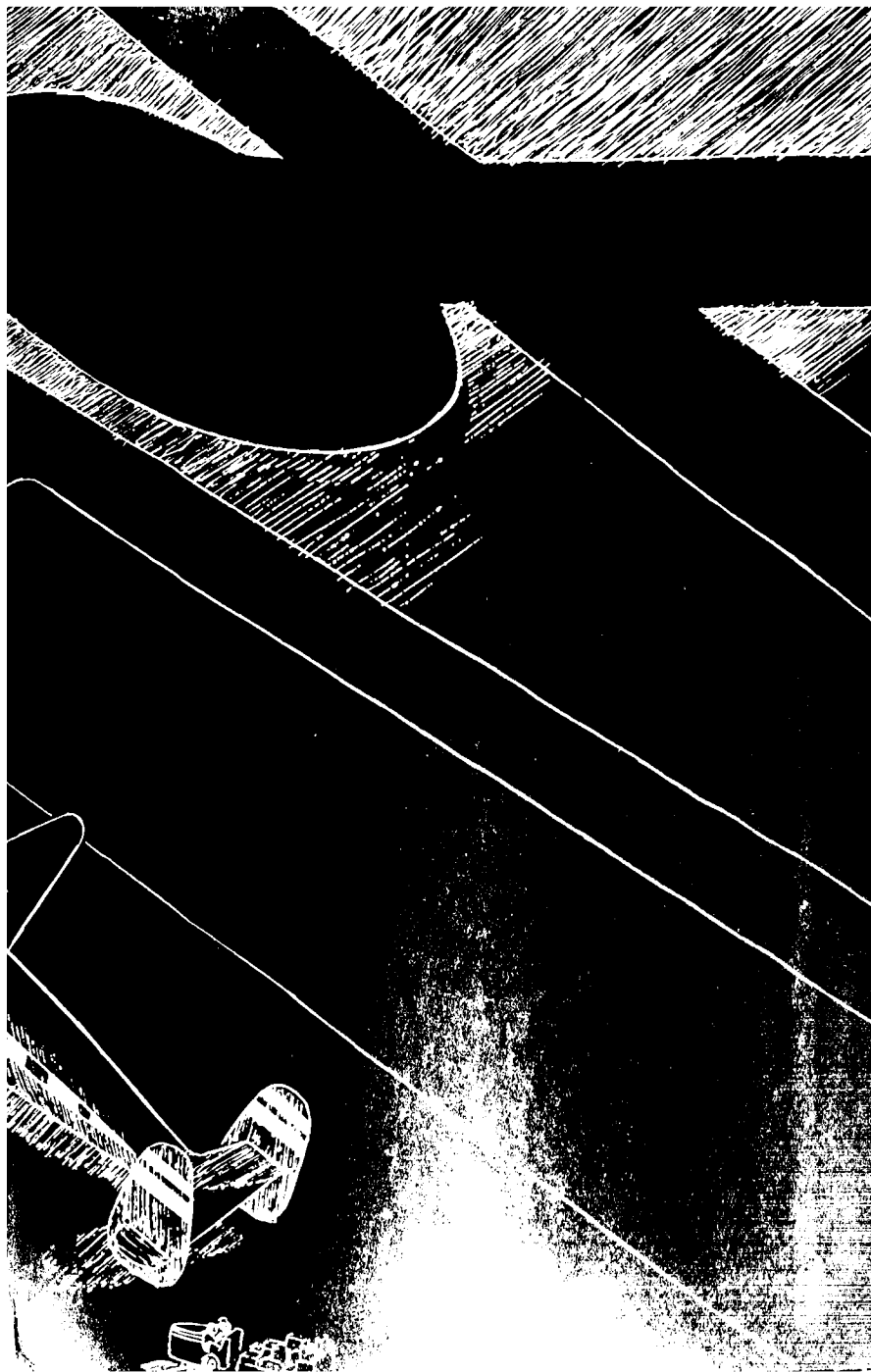
"You reunited a family." Mrs. Lane smiled.

Mary and Jean said they would sail to the village with her.

"And come back soon, Vicki!" Mr. Lane said. "Today's family party is just the first, just one—compared to all the happy reunions we'll have from now on."

Vicki smiled and waved and jumped aboard the lobster boat. The twins sat down on either side of her. Benjamin Verga pushed off, and the boat skimmed out across the brilliant water.





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Mystery, Travel, and High Adventure ... with VICKI BARR *Flight Stewardess*



SILVER WINGS FOR VICKI
VICKI FINDS THE ANSWER
THE HIDDEN VALLEY MYSTERY
THE SECRET OF MAGNOLIA MANOR
THE CLUE OF THE BROKEN BLOSSOM
BEHIND THE WHITE VEIL

THE MYSTERY AT HARTWOOD HOUSE
PERIL OVER THE AIRPORT
THE MYSTERY OF THE VANISHING LADY
THE SEARCH FOR THE MISSING TWIN
THE GHOST AT THE WATERFALL
THE CLUE OF THE GOLD COIN

THE SILVER RING MYSTERY
THE CLUE OF THE CARVED RUBY
THE MYSTERY OF FLIGHT 908

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